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SEPTEMBER 1998

TRUE SUSPECTS

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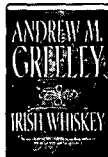
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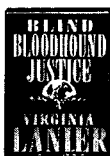
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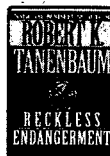
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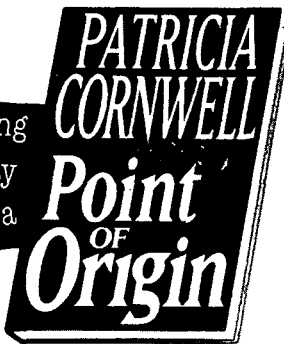


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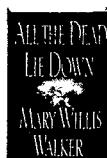
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EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

In our cover story, "True Suspects," B. K. Stevens brings us a new adventure for that intrepid duo, Lieutenant Walt Johnson and Sergeant Gordon Bolt. Regular readers of AHMM will know that without looking—Bonnie Stevens' epistolary series about these two policemen always has "True" in the title. The first, "True Detective," appeared in our June 1988 issue; it was followed by "True Confession" (5/89), "True Romance" (11/90), "True Adventure" (4/92), "True Crime" (3/94), "True Love" (9/95), and "True Story" (2/97). Poor Walt! All this time Bolt has been way ahead of him, all the while standing respectfully a pace behind.

Can Walt ever solve a crime on his own, thereby saving his self-respect? Will Bolt and Walt's mother ever tie the knot? Can our doughty author find more "True" titles? Watch these pages closely!

In the meantime we're delighted to introduce a new writer,

Flonet Biltgen Bonaventure, author of "A Glimpse of a Distant Relative." Ms. Bonaventure has had one other story published, but this is her first mystery. Pittsburgh is her hometown; the University of Illinois at Champagne-Urbana is her alma mater, with a major in philosophy and minors in rhetoric, psychology, chemistry, physics, and math; she is presently a "knowledge-base 'engineer'—technical documentation"; she likes to play bridge and "pick around" on the guitar and banjo; and she and her husband "put about six thousand miles a year on our Harleys, touring the U.S."

Finally, welcome back to Oklahoman Jerry Frank Skarky, author of "Making a Killing." His first (of two) stories for us, "Willie's Story," which appeared in our June 1990 issue, won the Robert L. Fish Award for Best First Mystery Short Story of that year; he is currently finishing up a novel.

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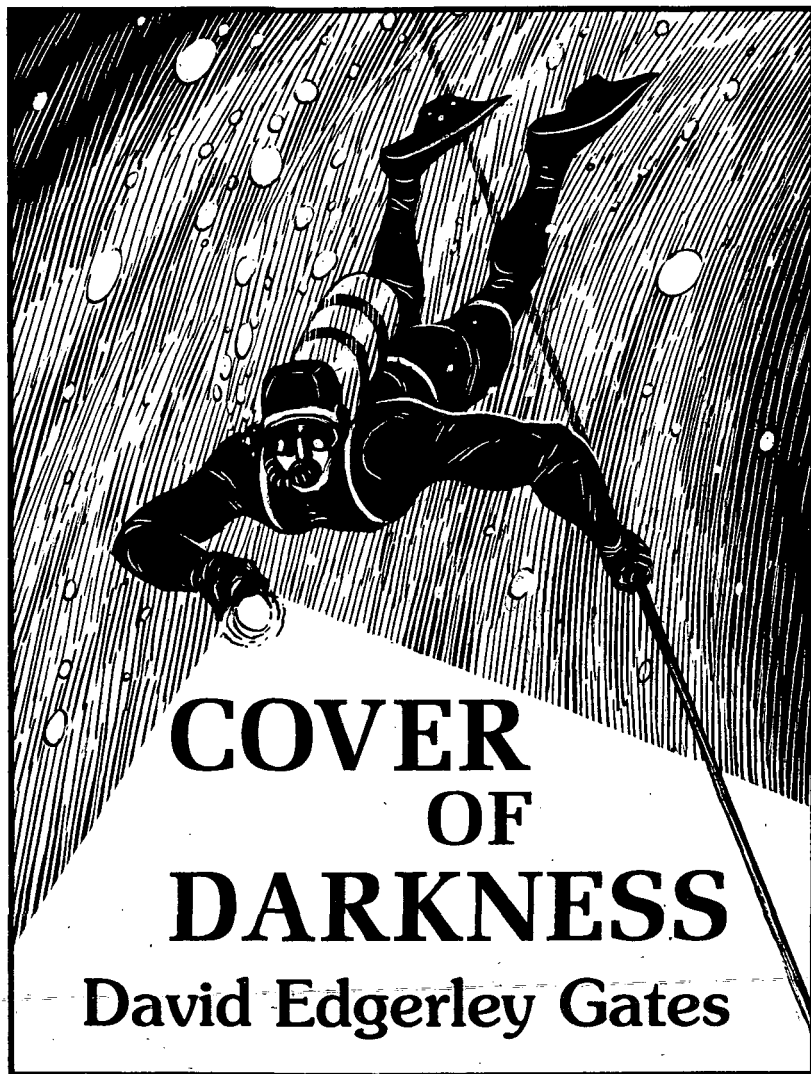
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McElroy got off the plane at Gatow at 2100 hours Berlin time. Kim Adrian was there to meet him. The two men shook hands.

"Why all the hugger-mugger?" McElroy asked.

Adrian smiled apologetically.

"We find ourselves captive to informed sources," he told him. "We're on our own patch here, of course, but the Americans supplied us with the operational intelligence."

"Does that mean we have to play by their rules?" McElroy asked.

Adrian shrugged. "A small price to pay," he said.

The face of the airfield was greasy in the drizzle of light rain; the runways vacant and granular under the glare of the approach lights. Blue halogen lamps hissed along the perimeter fence, and the clang of metal striking metal carried clearly across the vault of open space, as sound travels over water.

The two men crossed the wet tarmac into the lee of the hangars. A black Mercedes touring saloon with the motor running was waiting in the shadows, showing no lights. It was flanked by two lorryloads of Tommies in battle dress, British Army of the Rhine, posting automatic weapons.

Berlin in March of 1965 was still an occupied city under the authority of the four wartime Allied powers—Great Britain, the United States, France, and the Soviet Union—but with nominal German civil administration. The divisions of the Cold War had taken on a brutal material shape with the building of the Wall four years before, and the No Man's Land it created, a death strip patrolled by armed guards.

Adrian glanced up at the fretful weather. There was a kinetic charge about his person, as if he were a lightning rod for the static electricity in the air, or an excitement he couldn't quite contain. He opened the door to the car, and McElroy ducked inside.

There were two men sitting in back. The U.S. Air Force major surrendered his place to McElroy, taking one of two folding jump seats opposite. Adrian got aboard, tugging the door shut behind him, and adjusted the blackout curtains. He took the second jump seat, put on the dome light, and rapped on the polarized glass that separated them from the driver. The Mercedes oiled into gear, the trucks fell in convoy, fore and aft, and they picked up speed sharply as they left the air base. The four men sat the around the back of the moving vehicle as if for a rubber of bridge.

Kim Adrian made the introductions. "Commander Jimmy McElroy, Lieutenant Commander Gwyn Owen, casename BRINE."

McElroy studied the Welshman on the seat beside him. Thick and dark, weight about thirteen stone, dressed in dark worsted pants and an Appledore jersey, a naval tunic stripped of service insignia, and rope-soled boots. Bare of jewelry save a heavy diver's watch on a synthetic band. BRINE, McElroy thought to himself, fishing for the association.

"Deepwater search and rescue," the Welshman said, smiling. "We haven't met."

"I've heard the name," McElroy said.

"I've heard yours," BRINE said. "You headed the dive team that went after an American B-52 that crashed in the Med off Algeciras, reportedly carrying nuclear weapons."

"It was a joint operation, US/UK," McElroy told him.

They both turned their gaze toward the Air Force major.

"Major Jacobson is with us in the office of liaison with the American defense intelligence effort," Adrian explained. "Major, why don't you do the honors? We can all benefit from your expertise."

If he read condescension in Adrian's tone, the major didn't acknowledge it. He leaned forward, unzipped his documents case, and extracted a green vinyl folder, opening it on his lap. "This briefing is classified CODE-WORD, with a restricted command channel," he announced.

McElroy offered BRINE a cigarette, which was declined. McElroy lit one for himself, and sat back, watching the smoke eddy in the currents of the air conditioning.

"This morning at first light, Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces began an Air Defense exercise," the major said. "Russian bombers took the part of aggressor aircraft and drew fighter reaction throughout Poland and East Germany. We've been monitoring the exercise since it started." He glanced up from the material in his folder. "Berlin is a hundred miles inside East Germany," he remarked. "Russian and East German units are stationed all around it, some of them quite close to the city. We intercept their military radio traffic on a regular basis, and this kind of readiness exercise is fairly rou-

tine. It's a dress rehearsal, simulating an actual attack on Soviet forward defenses by NATO forces."

He took an eight by ten photograph out of his folder and handed it to McElroy.

The black and white glossy was in an acetate envelope. It showed a radar screen, a grey circle spattered across with white pips and bars. Superimposed on the screen was a grid of the civil air corridors leading out of Berlin to the West German border. The radar targets being tracked ran in a line down the middle of the screen from north to south.

"At the top of the screen is the Baltic coast, and the bottom is the Czech border," Major Jacobson went on. "In the middle is Berlin. You can see that the flight path of the attacking bombers takes them right over the city, even though they're flying at ten thousand meters."

McElroy passed the photograph to BRINE.

"The point is that the Russian bombers taking part in this mock attack flew in from bases in the Soviet Union, and then they flew home again," the major said. "But under cover of the bombers, flying directly below them at an altitude of eight thousand meters, six aircraft of an unknown operational profile were deployed into East Germany."

"How do you know they didn't go back?" McElroy asked.

"At about 1030 hours this morning, local time, on approach to Gross Dolln airfield right outside

Berlin, one of those six planes developed an apparent instrument malfunction and crashed," Major Jacobson said.

There was a cone of silence in the car. The air conditioning rustled. Radial tires wheezed over wet asphalt.

"Where?" BRINE asked.

"Here," Kim Adrian said. "In the British sector of West Berlin."

The intercom popped. McElroy blinked.

"Sir?" The driver spoke from the front seat. "We're alongside the Havel now."

Adrian depressed the squawk bar. "Thank you," he said. "Flash the truck ahead, and we'll have a look."

The Mercedes slowed down. Adrian switched off the dome light. McElroy parted the side curtains, peering out. BRINE crouched on the floorboards by the window.

The darkened Mercedes rolled by a bank of woods along a half frozen river. The weather had turned to a fluff of snow that fluttered against the windows of the car and sifted away into the gloom. McElroy's breath condensed vaguely on the inside of the glass. He made out figures in the woods stationed about every thirty meters along the riverbank, patrolling the edge of the trees. They were obviously standing guard and were armed with assault weapons. He saw the flare of a match as one of them lit a cigarette, cupping the flame.

"Russians," Kim Adrian said,

speaking softly at his left shoulder.

They drove in silence past an omnibus and an armored personnel carrier. A hooded sentry loomed up and fell away in the night.

Adrian rapped his knuckles on the glass partition behind the driver, and the Mercedes picked up speed. Adrian secured the blackout curtains and turned the dome light back on. McElroy lit another cigarette, keeping his face blank.

"Berlin is governed by a Status of Forces agreement," Adrian said. "The four military powers accommodate each other within those limits. Following the crash, the commandant of the Soviet garrison sent over two busloads of troops to guard the site. The commandant of the British sector assigned his units to flank the Russians. Late this afternoon, when a Russian salvage team attempted to clear the checkpoints, they were refused entry. The salvage team will be allowed in when the Russians withdraw their men."

"It's a stalemate," McElroy said.

"We can stall them until daybreak," Adrian said. "Which gives us no more than seven hours."

The car drew to a stop. Major Jacobson zipped up his documents case. Adrian turned off the dome light, and one by one the four men got out of the car, McElroy last. He stepped out into snow gusting in a falling wind and blowing off a body of water he could sense close at hand.

They were standing next to a large communications wagon with US AIR FORCE stenciled on the side panels and the message RESTRICTED AREA lettered on the door.

"We're at this point just half a kilometer north of the nearest Russians," Adrian said. "Which puts us approximately eleven hundred meters from the crash site."

"Which is where, exactly?" McElroy asked, turning slowly to get his bearings.

"At the bottom of the river Havel in about sixty-five feet of water," Adrian told him, gesturing into the drifting snowflakes.

The wind died away, and McElroy heard the chuckling of the river and the thin creak of the skim ice in the darkness.

The interior of the communications van was painted the color of tinned peas. One end was laid out as a Ready Room, with a teletype and a scrambler terminal. The near wall was a bank of monitoring and recording devices, hooded screens, computer readouts, and calibrating equipment, manned by U.S. Air Force personnel.

The opposite wall was given over to an eight-foot-square display map of Northern Europe and the Baltic, sandwiched in Plexiglas and backlit. There was a radar grid laid over the map to a radius of two hundred nautical miles out from Berlin, at the center. The Plexiglas was criss-

crossed with dotted lines in colored grease pencil, red, yellow, blue, and green, aircraft headings marked with numbers and times. The colors were fluorescent. McElroy understood that the map board showed the course of the Air Defense exercise up to the time the Russians had lost their plane. The route of that aircraft was indicated in black, with an X in the river.

Major Jacobson led them to the far end of the operations area where a small work station had been set up.

"Aircraft carry electronic systems with specific signatures," the major said. "An onboard radar, for example, sends out signals of a certain frequency, and we can analyze those characteristics to identify it. Before the crash we were able to record some signals from the aircraft, but they don't indicate anything we recognize. That plane is equipped with a new radar, perhaps being tested for the first time."

"That might explain why it crashed," BRINE said.

Jacobson smiled. "It just might," he said. He took a diagram out of his folder. It was a three-view schematic perspective of an aircraft—side, top, and full-face views—with dimensions to scale and a block of text elucidating technical data running along the margin: "This is a Yakovlev prototype Soviet fighter-bomber," the major told them. "The airframe has been adapted to long-range, all-weather interceptor capacity and given the interim NATO

designation **FIREFLY**. We believe this is the aircraft that crashed, but we don't have an accurate profile. We know next to nothing about this plane, and it looks like the Russians have dropped one right in our laps."

Adrian switched on a high-intensity drafting light and positioned it over a large graph.

"This is a chart of a four mile stretch of the river Havel," he said. "Point of impact, here. The width of the river is from five to six hundred meters shore to shore, but fifteen hundred or so meters downstream it narrows to a bottleneck with an attendant Bernoulli effect. The current picks up rapidly. Russian troops are stationed on both banks of the river some five hundred yards north and south of the crash site. Our current position is a little over a thousand meters upstream."

McElroy pursed his lips and let out a deep breath. "You want us to thread the needle," he said.

"Support personnel?" BRINE asked Kim Adrian.

"We've brought in an underwater demolition team from Malta," Adrian told him. "You're to brief them only with regard to the job at hand, not its significance."

BRINE consulted his watch. "Best get to it," he said.

McElroy shrugged.

The two men went outside and crunched across the frosted ground in the eddying snow to the canteen, marked with the broad A of the British army. An infantry corporal drew them

strong, scalding tea from a spigot into paper-thin tin cups. The metal conducted the heat and scorched their palms, and both of them passed their cups back and forth from hand to hand, blowing off the rising steam.

"What do you make of it?" BRINE asked him.

"Could be worse," McElroy said.

"Tricky stretch of water, that," BRINE remarked.

McElroy nodded, sipping his tea thoughtfully.

"You want to throw for who goes first?" BRINE asked.

McElroy smiled. "I'll go," he said. "I'm wondering now what kind of fish we've got on the line."

"Mind you're not the bait," the Welshman said.

McElroy made the dive from a point on the riverbank a thousand yards upstream from the triangulated position of the wreckage. The skin of ice sighed as he slipped under it, and the dark water closed over his head like a shroud.

The air expelled from his underwater breathing apparatus flailed away downstream. He rehearsed the operation of the waterproof infrared spotlight strapped to his left forearm and paid himself out on the towline into deeper water. There were two thousand meters of cable on the reel, six-ply monofilament and sheathed steel. A second reel hung from his work apron. Like flycasting gear, the reels were equipped with friction locks. The

rewind was mechanical. He slipped the drag on the cable, quartering across the current. The bones in his wrists shivered as he picked up speed. He set himself like a hook in the throat of the river. The mass of water crowded down on him, both a physical pressure and a slough of sound. The pulse of the channel accelerated along the rivercourse and drew him down it like a trawling lure. The beam of the infrared torch picked out striations in the silt. Shadows flitted across tumbled-smooth river stones and industrial litter. There was a high level of turbidity in the water, limiting his range of vision. He took up slack in the line, tightening the drag.

At either hand now, as he plunged along the dark watercourse belowdecks, the Russians stood topside watch in the dirty weather. Downriver, the UDT had strung safety netting across the narrows. Beyond that was the Wann See, the locks of the canals, Potsdam. McElroy steadied himself on the axis of the line, trying to correct for his yaw as he swung in a wide traverse across the riverbed. He paid out more cable, a little at a time.

The dull bulk of the aircraft came up at him out of the river like a kraken, lying belly-up on the bottom.

His first pass took him by just short of the antenna mast on the nose. He unreeled another few meters of cable and overshot the fuselage on the return sweep, grounding precariously on the

underside of the port wing. He dogged the reel and dropped to three points of contact, still wobbly from his plummet downriver, but the airframe didn't settle as it picked up his nearly negligible mass. McElroy recovered his balance and hugged the metal surface, flattening his body so the water slipstreamed past him.

They hadn't prepared him for her size. The aircraft seemed enormous. He estimated the wingspan at ninety feet and the length overall at about a hundred and thirty. Upside-down in the silt, with the canopy and vertical stabilizers half buried, the height of the wreck was still almost eighteen feet. It was an inert, ungainly artifact, lit only in unsatisfactory fragments by the narrow focus of the electric torch.

McElroy secured the towline and slipped over the leading edge of the wing, set at a severely raked angle to the hull. The water tugged at him, and the fuselage afforded little friction for purchase. He was wary of handholds, the crash having ruptured stress points, leaving sharp, ridged fissures in the skin. He studied a break in the hull plates. It looked like a reinforced honeycomb.

He worked his way delicately to the nose. The bow section was metallic and opaque. He ducked down and put his face mask to the cracked canopy, peering into the tangle of the cockpit. The instrument panel was obscured by a snarl of wiring harness and by a large mass of twisted uphol-

story. He realized it was the underside of the pilot's command seat. The pilot had stayed with his aircraft and had only fired the ejection mechanism when it was too late. The explosive charge had driven him through the canopy, head-first into the riverbed.

McElroy eased up onto the starboard wing. He unhooked the dragline reel from his kit and threaded the cable through the intake of the starboard engine. He felt an itch travel across the airframe from the set of his cleat on the opposite wing. It was the upstream towline binding against steel and vibrating under load. BRINE and the Maltese team were on their way down with the oxyacetylene gear.

He took a grip on the reel and pushed off into the current, slipstreaming over the ventral tail stabilizers. He let off the drag, and the line played free. The river bore him away downstream. The plane wreck swept back in the murky water and faded into darkness.

The current swelled, gathering force as the banks of the river drew together. McElroy tightened the drag, slowing down. Plastic collars on the cable told off distance in metric increments, and he brought himself to a stop five hundred meters downriver from the wreck. He screwed a piton through the silt into the clay underneath and snubbed the safety line to a snap-ring. He locked the cable reel, leaving it to bump against the bottom.

Calculating his position at

about two thousand meters above the emergency net, McElroy checked his watch to clock his return against the river and paced himself hand over hand up the dragline. It took him four and a half minutes to make the distance, which meant a little over a minute for every hundred meters gained. He estimated it would take ten minutes to get up the towline from the wreck to the staging area, where they were free to surface, and figured his margin of working air at twenty minutes.

The aircraft wreckage swam up out of the dusky water like coals rekindling under ashes. McElroy scrambled aboard the starboard wing and crab-walked across the body of the plane to port, hands flat on the plates, treading water downstream to steady himself as he skittered over the bump of a ventral fairing between the engine intakes.

BRINE and a backup diver had manhandled the oxygen and acetylene cylinders into position, the tanks depressed into the bottom sediment and silting up on the upstream face. McElroy scooped up the towline reel, made sure of the set of his cleat, and swam forward with some effort across the nose, letting the reel pay out surplus cable from the hitch. He kicked over and down, trailing line, and took a tuck around the body of the aircraft. He locked the reel, passing it up to BRINE. BRINE passed the reel between his legs and set his feet against the fuselage, straddling the ca-

ble. It acted as a breeches buoy, leaving the Welshman with both hands free. He took up the blowtorch, fending the hoses clear, and lit it off. A hot, brilliant flare incandesced at the cutting head of the blowtorch in a lather of pressurized bubbles. They boiled away furiously up out of the light, spending themselves in the dark, restless tumble of water, and were carried off downstream.

BRINE started his first cut on the port side of the radome, two feet aft of the tip, it being his object to clip the nose of the plane off like the top of a softboiled egg.

The infrared-sensitive faceplate of McElroy's diving mask did little to filter out the visible light spectrum, and he shielded his eyes with his left hand, not looking directly at the hot spot where the metal honeycomb oxidized grudgingly into smudge. The torch bit in with a rush of steam, and a purling line of alloy glittered liquidly along the cut, fusing to the edges. Powdery detritus congealed immediately in the cold running water to flakes of sediment blown off by the rush of gas. The bright glare at the cutting head sparkled in a clouded halo of grit, impurities precipitated out and iron particles introduced into the oxygen flow to facilitate combustion. The divers were counting on the current to dispel the stink and high volume of exhaust gases attendant on subsurface salvage. BRINE made laborious progress. The skin of the airframe had been designed

to withstand the high temperature of atmospheric friction.

McElroy checked his time. He was already on his reserve air. He straightened, backpedaling, and hovered near the wreck a moment. Then he went up the towline for fresh tanks. It took him nine minutes and change to make the distance.

The drizzle had turned gusty and ice-laden when he broke water at the shoreline. McElroy scrambled up the slippery bank and sat down facing the river. He stripped off his mask and diving hood and let the mouthpiece dangle. Two ratings took the duty of changing his tanks. One of them brought him a mug of tea with a dram of rum in it. McElroy sipped at it gratefully. The flat and muted sounds about him were hesitant in the thinner medium of air, a hollow chime against the disequilibrium of his inner ear. The hiss and mutter of the river at his feet, the throbbing generators on the communications wagons, the movement of people in and around the vehicles, all seemed heard from a great distance. He could see nothing of the far bank in the darkness and the raw wet. The men scattered about the staging area nearby were close to silent, trading short courtesies, smoking, drinking tea or coffee, waiting on the event like guests at a wedding before the bride arrives.

The second rating brought him the underwater camera. McElroy slithered down the bank.

The two divers of the relief team

were waiting in the shallows. McElroy steadied himself against the towline, the cable angling into the water from the drumhead on the winch, and squirmed back into his hood. He spat in his face mask, rinsed it in the river, and settled it over his eyes and nose. He cleared his mouthpiece, put it between his teeth, and slipped underwater.

The relief divers followed McElroy's lead, sliding down the cable. The hot blur at the nose of the aircraft grew sharper and brighter as they descended into the gloom, their movements bulled by the tug of the current.

BRINE was bent to his work with the torch. He'd finished the cut circling the nose and was shearing the rivets. McElroy moved alongside, signaling to one of his divers to take over BRINE's post. The two men accomplished a brief exchange with hand signals, and then BRINE wagged McElroy the thumbs up and hauled off topside with his diving mate.

McElroy straddled the fuselage and indicated the next cut, a ventral incision the length of the radome, a distance of about ten feet straight back. The diver with the torch set to work, the second diver taking up the slack in the gas feedlines to keep them from fouling. They duck-walked back from the nose, paying themselves out on short stops of cable. The alloy panels split under the hammer of the blowtorch, the job going faster because they were separating a seam in the hull. Bits of

glittering debris fused together and spun away downriver.

McElroy prowled aft with the camera, photographing the salient features with a strobe attachment. The otherwise aerodynamically clean surfaces of the hull were interrupted by missile pylons well inboard, large bulged fairings on the underside of the fuselage, clusters of electronic vanes, and asymmetric dielectric strips, nonconducting. At the tail, just forward of the jet exhausts, the heavy panels of the air brakes juttied out, deployed on their hydraulic struts.

A panic response maybe, or a last-minute maneuver to ditch the plane on its belly with minimal damage. McElroy had a sudden unbidden glimpse of what it must have been like to experience the crash firsthand, the whistle of the air brakes and the shudder of the laboring engines, the abrupt jibe in the airframe as it dropped to stall speed, losing lift, the controls unresponsive, and the top-heavy plummet of inert mass into the river, the turbines inhaling water instead of air, sucking the aircraft to the bottom as the turbine blades cracked with the violent drop in temperature. The reflex ejection release, the concussive plunge, the quick death from a broken neck or suffocation in the muck.

McElroy drove ahead again, hand over hand, pushing with his flippers to counter the pull downstream. He took hold gingerly of a horizontal stanchion and propelled himself forward,

swimming up under the port wing and shoving his way through the soupy water, murky with particulate matter, disturbed sediment, and debris. Hot and brilliant, the bloom of the cutting torch flared erratically, a spastic iris leaking and occluding light. McElroy felt trapped for a moment in the airless press, but then he collected himself and moved on up the fuselage.

The nose of the plane was split, and the diver with the torch was making a lateral cut around the ventral surface of the hull to finish a pattern in an elongated H, like dissecting a frog.

BRINE and his diving mate came back down the cable, relieving the divers with the torch. They went up the line, but McElroy stayed behind. The three men began jimmying up the plates, using heat and breaker bars to snap the welds. They peeled back the alloy sheets and broke off the nose of the radome.

The assembly exposed inside the sprung plates was about the size of a small automobile engine block, cased in some kind of composition material similar to Bakelite. The divers peered in at it.

The components made up an interlocking clutter, and the housing was locked into the circular steel ribs of the hull frame, sides and top. Color-coded wires twisted back into the shallow recesses behind the instrument panel. Squinting past the blistered steel, McElroy squeezed the camera into the gap and took a couple of shots from different

angles. He could see that the radar module incorporated a bayonet mount, for repair or replacement. If the frame weren't warped too far out of true, they could extract the whole assembly depending on its weight. He directed BRINE to burn through the second framing rib aft so they could spring the jaws of the severed struts, twist the radar casing, and thread it between them, like drawing a piston out of its sleeve.

BRINE tapped his forefinger on the crystal of his watch. McElroy nodded and swam up the towline with the camera.

Stripped out of his wetsuit, McElroy hunkered bareheaded in the open door of the van. He was dressed in a sweatshirt and sweatpants, his feet in insulated slippers, wrapped in a wool blanket, drinking black coffee from a dented tin cup. Behind him BRINE rummaged around in their stores, hunting dry socks for the next dive. This smaller vehicle served as their support inventory, bare of communications equipment, the floor chalked off into sections for different instruments and gear. They hadn't been assigned a security guard.

The rain had let up briefly, and looking up, McElroy could make out a faint starshine. There was no moon, but he took that for an omen.

Parked in front of the van was a late-model American Ford sedan, the body and brightwork masked off in flat camouflage

drab. The windows and wind-screen were nonreflecting glass, and the license plates were lettered in Cyrillic. The car was attached to the Allied Military Mission. The rear suspension of the Ford hiked the differential up a good six inches higher than the front end, which was just the fashion for running heavy contraband goods over bad roads at high speed, McElroy figured. The driver, a U.S. Army Spec/5, lounged on the hood of the car smoking a Camel; he had what the Englishman pictured as a rangy Appalachian Piedmont cast to him, the look of a family history rich in hot cars and moonshine. McElroy knew he wasn't far wrong. The high-powered, heavily sprung Mission vehicles regularly played hare-and-hounds with Soviet military personnel and East German *Volkspolizei*, traveling under diplomatic cover and taking snapshots of restricted installations.

The back seat of the Ford, hung with blackout curtains, doubled as a darkroom. The rear door opened, and the Air Force major, Jacobson, got out, followed by Kim Adrian. The major had a manila envelope with him. McElroy didn't see who else was in the back of the car. The enlisted man, ignoring Major Jacobson, flipped his cigarette away and got behind the wheel of the Ford. He drove away.

Jacobson and Adrian came over to McElroy. BRINE came to stand in the doorway of the van at McElroy's shoulder, their shadows

thrown out sharply on the wet ground like those of a primitive family group huddled in the mouth of a cave.

"We've got photographs of the landing at Gross Dolln," Major Jacobson said. "Taken together with what you've given us from the river, we have a definite identification. We can confirm the downed plane is a Firefly."

The two divers moved out of the doorway, and the other men stepped up, halfway into the light. "We're short of time, Jimmy," Adrian said.

"I'm short a man," McElroy said.

One of the divers on the Maltese team had been injured, not seriously but bleeding badly. BRINE had brought him back to the surface. The other two divers were below and due up.

"Can we do it?" Kim Adrian asked impatiently. "That's the immediate question."

McElroy smiled through his fatigue. "Is that the royal we?" he inquired.

Adrian ducked his head. "We need breathing room, Jimmy, a space to fold our tents and steal away," he said.

BRINE glanced at his watch. "Two hours until daybreak," he remarked.

"I'm not going to risk the men," McElroy said to Adrian. "One team, one more dive."

Adrian nodded. "It's your responsibility," he said. He and Major Jacobson left the trailer.

McElroy and BRINE looked at each other.

"A tired man gets careless,"

BRINE said, "and a careless man makes mistakes."

McElroy turned away, flexing his back and shoulders in an effort to shake off his stiffness and jitters. "You don't strike me as a careless man," he said.

"I wasn't thinking of myself," BRINE told him.

"Good," McElroy said. "I wouldn't want to push my luck. We've had it fairly easy, barring accident."

"Knock wood," the Welshman said.

The two divers gathered up their clammy wetsuits.

Now he was chilled and tiring and running against the clock. The dark moving water muttered against him fretfully as he made his way down the humming cable to the wreck, ill at ease and out of sorts.

He was irritated, for no good reason, by the orange glare of the infrared lights. He felt short of breath, and he realized he was experiencing nervous symptoms similar to oxygen deprivation. Checking his descent, McElroy hooked a leg over the cable, gulped a lungful of air, and passed the hoses and mouthpiece over his head. He shucked one arm out of the tank harness to swing the tanks past his shoulder and tapped the regulator gently. Air streamed through the hoses at a steady pressure. He shrugged the tanks back into place between his shoulder blades and took the mouthpiece in his teeth again. These

second thoughts told him next to nothing about the condition of his equipment but said a good deal about his state of mind. He resumed his slide down the line into deeper water. The fear that had touched him briefly took up silent watch in his colon. His nerves steadied as he settled feet-first at the ruptured bow of the wreck.

The broken nose of the aircraft looked like a radish rose. The rivets and retaining bolts had been burned through and the framing sprung and pried apart. McElroy recovered the dangling reel and snugged up the cable, playing it free of snags as he unwound it from around the hull, kicking up and over the wreck and riding the line centrifugally like a rock on a string. He worked his cleat loose from the wing and took in more line, pulling himself back even with the opening in the nose section. He hitched a loop in the cable and felt into the cavity, looking for a purchase point on the radar casing. He took a bight around the antenna pins, drew the knot tight, and tied it off. Giving himself a little slack, he looped the cable a second time and then a third, like trussing a roast. He hooked the reel to the towline and retreated up the cable some ten meters, giving it room to bind. If the line parted or came loose under strain, it would snap back on itself like a whip, which could take off a couple of fingers or even his hand.

The towline traveled back up-river a thousand meters to a

winch on shore. BRINE was waiting in the shallow water for signals. They'd rigged a basic comm link, two switches at either end of the low-impedance static line in the cable, to buzz each other back and forth. There wasn't enough current in the circuit to give either of them a shock, just a faint tingle when the switch was depressed, once to warp cable onto the drum, twice for full stop, and three for slack line.

McElroy squeezed the rubber bulb with the switch inside. The line shivered in his grip and began to twist as it came under the pull of the winch ashore. The length of cable stiffened out under load. The crank of the winch paused, but the vibration of power in the line was still there. The cable strummed against the heel of his hand.

He squeezed the switch again and held the beam of his torch fixed on the jagged crack in the fuselage. The winch began to pull again. The radar housing ground forward between the ribs. McElroy quickly squeezed the switch bulb twice. He slipped down the cable to check the clearance.

There wasn't much play, but the radar seemed to be sliding straight ahead without shifting its weight. McElroy backpedaled up the cable and squeezed the switch bulb again. The winch operator picked up the strain. The heavy casing shrieked against the frame, inching along. The towline was tight as a bowstring.

The front end of the radar

worked its way free of the fuselage, jarring against it slightly. McElroy tensed. The radar wobbled and dug forward. The back end pitched to one side, binding against a strut.

He pinched the switch bulb twice, and then pinched it again three times. He slid down the cable. The radar was caught between the broken ribs of the frame like a bear's shoulders stuck in a hollow log.

McElroy eyed the dimensions of the casing against the space available to move it in. He swam back up to the switch bulb, signaled the winch to take up slack, and then a full stop to hold the radar steady. He slipped down to the nose again. Using a long breaker bar, he tried to buck the casing back and forth to clear the ribs. It was jammed too tight. He backpedaled and squeezed the switch bulb three times, then three times again. The cable sagged. McElroy braced a short crowbar against the framing rib just behind the radar housing to act as a stop. He took the long breaker bar and poked into the open seam from above on the port side and got a purchase, but the housing didn't move.

He drew the bar out and laid it across the housing, hooking it under the lip of the opening in the fuselage and putting his weight on it to force the radar down. The casing torqued a little, easing the bind, but there was still friction. McElroy slipped the bar in forward and managed to wiggle the assembly back a fraction, straight-

ening it out. He blinked back the sweat in his eyes. There was a light condensation on the inside of his faceplate. He put his head and shoulders inside the cavity. The neoprene wetsuit squeaked against the corrugated steel, and McElroy winced. He shifted his grip on the long bar and jimmied the radar casing away from the broken framing rib. It settled, and he pulled himself out.

Paddling forward, he snagged the cable and positioned the breaker bar under it to span the gap in the nose of the aircraft. Under power from the winch the bar would act as tackle for the line, lifting the radar casing past the frame. McElroy felt out the slack in the towline and stood on it. His negative buoyancy didn't count for much. He clambered astride the nose again and let himself down into the hole, warily. The cable sideslipped a touch. The casing wavered. He tried to adjust it with a flippered foot. It moved an inch, and McElroy lifted his feet in a hurry. He swam past the crimped edges of the cut and regained the towline, giving the signal switch one pinch and then two.

The cable tightened and then stopped pulling. McElroy dropped back to the nose and reached in it to push the radar casing into a better position. The assembly jerked suddenly. The scrape of the casing carried up the cable. McElroy kicked off but missed his footing. The radar rocked in place and tipped. There was too much slack in the line. McElroy jack-

knifed his legs as the back end of the radar came loose and tried to use his lower body as a lever, but the force of the current trapped him against the fuselage, stuck like a fly on a windowpane. The forward end of the radar caught his left arm, grinding it against the struts. He felt both the bones in his forearm crack like lath.

He was choking on inhaled water because he'd bitten through his mouthpiece retainer, and the hoses danced against his sternum in a high rolling boil. He made a grab at them with his free hand. The current dragged his body back against the fuselage, his weight taken by the arm pinned in the wreck, and the pain nearly made him faint. He flailed at the current, kicking desperately, trying to shovel the crippled mouthpiece back between his lips, coughing and losing it, catching it again, trying now to clear his windpipe and the mouthpiece, water rattling in his lungs with a deep and unbearable ache as though he were breathing lye. He managed to grab a handhold and gulp some air.

McElroy trembled with cold. He kept his breathing shallow and regular, hoping not to go into shock. His blood, smoky in the water, slipped away thinly downriver. He quite expected to die.

The swimmer seemed to sink into the hot bruise of the orange lights with the classic, undernourished grace of a predatory fish. It was the Welshman, to-bogganing down the cable with

the river at his back, coming to see what had gone wrong. McElroy's heart rose in his throat.

BRINE swung out on the cable and kicked free, skating alongside the hull to McElroy and treading water downstream. He took McElroy in a close embrace, holding his weight gently to relieve the pressure on his arm. BRINE felt along McElroy's arm, down to the elbow and then moved his hand across the face of the heavy casing.

Still pinning McElroy to the wreck with his hip, he cocked his knee and unstrapped the scabbarded knife from his calf. He wrapped the strap around McElroy's bicep, drawing it tight enough to cut off circulation, and twisted the scabbard, coaxing it under the tourniquet. McElroy had already lost most sensation below it. BRINE made sure McElroy's breathing apparatus was secure and then shifted him carefully into a more comfortable position, guiding his free hand to the upper edge of the frame so he had a better grip to support his own weight.

BRINE ducked under the cable and retrieved the breaker bar. With the cable tight across his shoulders, he got a purchase on the radar housing and levered it forward. The housing grated on the rib. McElroy felt it, not in his arm but as a nausea of the inner ear. BRINE put his weight on the bar again, leaning back into the cable, and the housing tilted off McElroy's arm. The wound stuck to the metal for a

second, and then McElroy pulled free. BRINE reached out to steady him. The bar slipped in the notch, and the radar casing dropped against it. The casing twisted, twitching the cable. BRINE bounced against the hull. The bar rotated out of his grasp and flipped up in his face. It snapped his head back, and the cable caught him in the throat as it stiffened and sprang tight again, snatching him across the windpipe and hooking his chin back sharply. There was a gout of expelled air from his regulator.

McElroy batted weakly at the current with his good arm and grabbed at the cable, but it held fast, pinching BRINE in the wreckage like a snare. McElroy, near despair, struggled to work him loose. BRINE was inert, his limbs flaccid, and McElroy realized it was too late to save him. The Welshman's neck was broken, and his faceplate was filled with blood.

McElroy knew he didn't have the strength to pull himself up the towline on his own, and there was nothing he could do now to help the dead man. His air was already running low. That left downstream. He figured he didn't have much choice. He let go the towline and began a scrambling progress down the lee side of the wreck, lurching from one handhold to another in the headlong current, his grip skidding on the slippery plates. He steadied himself at the leading edge of the starboard wing and caught up the dragline anchored to the en-

gine intake. He hung fire, treading water for a minute and working up his courage.

Then he slid down the drag-line, beating a painful and ungainly traverse along the river bottom, guided by the cable strung another five hundred meters downstream.

Where the cable was made fast to the spike in the clay, McElroy was able to brace himself tenuously. He fumbled with the snapping and was able to gain control of the friction locks on the drag-line reel with his single hand.

His breathing had become hoarse and irregular. He let the current swing him downstream, holding the cable reel in his left armpit while he undid his equipment harness and weight belt and let them sink to the bottom. He took a long, shallow breath and made himself slip the locks on the cable reel.

The mass of dark water swept him up and drove him down the funnel, churning into the sluiceway of the narrows. The steel and monofilament line ran out unchecked, and he hurtled downriver, the reel chattering, barely able to maintain his hold on it. The skin was peeled off the palm of his hand and the muscles of his one good arm felt watery. His eyes stung from the sweat condensing on the inside of his faceplate like a prism of tears.

He knew the length of cable would run out some fifteen hundred meters below the anchored belay, something less than a quarter mile short of the sleeper

net. He also knew the undercurrents could play him false. He had to have buoyancy, to rise up so as to catch in the net and not be keelhailed on the bottom, pressed down by the rush of water until his air ran out. He was losing control of his relative attitude, too, and beginning to tumble. He was taking on the spin of a projectile down a rifled barrel, which imparted a spiral to the cable and might kink it. McElroy tried to turn end for end, bearing down on the friction locks and reversing himself as he kicked for the surface.

The cable played out without warning, jerking the reel out of his grip, and he was abruptly shaken loose, out of control and caroming head over heels down the channel, unable to check himself. The river bore him away.

He couldn't fight the current, but he managed to right himself and slipstream. Then his velocity was checked with a sudden tug as he ran aground in the net.

Up on deck, standing duty at the shoreline, the senior NCO caught the quick lunge in the line of phosphorescent floats, like the strike of a salmon, punching into the net at a point just right of center.

"Look alive, Tommy Atkins," the sergeant-major sang out, and gave off two short blasts on his whistle.

Floundering underwater, vertiginous and disoriented, McElroy tucked his body and rolled along the net. The water pressure had him pasted against it.

He pulled himself along, the open weave of the net too pliable and forgiving. His feet slithered on silt, then pebbles. He struggled upslope and broke water in the shallows, without even the strength to stand. He pushed the mouthpiece out from between his locked teeth with a furry tongue and stripped his mask off. He called out in the darkness, croaking uselessly against the slicker of the river in the broken ice. No sound came from his bruised throat. McElroy pawed at the water, helpless and exhausted. His lungs ached.

Men loomed on the riverbank above him, calling to each other, and signaling. McElroy drew himself out painfully onto the stones and mud of the riverbank. Soldiers were sliding down the embankment. They were speaking to him, but he had no sense of what they said. They pulled him up the bank. They were careful of his broken arm, although to McElroy it was numb. The sergeant called for a stretcher.

In the last hour before daybreak the night had cleared. McElroy lay on his back, looking up at the stars, smelling the wet stones, the damp soil and crushed grass, a doggy musk of men in sodden woolen clothes. He listened for the sound of the river clearing its throat and the breeze that came at first light, for the compacted breathing of the earth beneath him. He longed to hear the familiar. The water rattled over the stones at the river's edge, clucking insistently.

By late morning, when Kim Adrian saw McElroy off at the airfield, a Soviet salvage crew had been given permission to enter the British zone and set up a floating derrick on the Havel to raise the aircraft wreckage from the bottom of the river. BRINE's body had been recovered by the two divers on the Maltese team, but the radar stayed where it was. The Russians already smelled a rat and had lodged a vigorous protest with the Allied Control Commission. None of this was of much concern to McElroy.

He was taken across the tarmac to the waiting Trident in a wheelchair with a British army male nurse in attendance. McElroy's color was good for a man with his left arm in suspended traumatic amputation. It was under local anesthetic block and wrapped in a vinyl cold pack like those used to ship dressed meat.

Adrian's mood was surprisingly cheerful.

"We got a man killed," McElroy remarked quietly.

"We know what the risks are, Jimmy," Adrian said. "It's our stock in trade."

The male nurse had gone up into the plane to see to their accommodations. He appeared in the doorway at the head of the ramp and descended. McElroy got unsteadily to his feet with Adrian's help. "He traded his life for mine," McElroy said.

"And it could have been the reverse," Adrian said. "You aren't to blame."

"There's enough blame to go around," McElroy said.

"Ready when you are, commander," the male nurse said.

Adrian touched McElroy lightly on his good shoulder and turned away. McElroy watched him walk off across the tarmac toward the terminal building in the spare and chilly sunlight with his hands in his pockets.

Leaning on his escort, McElroy mounted the ramp. They made it safely aboard and felt their way carefully down the aisle to a window seat.

They were the only passengers on the flight. The nurse went back to fetch the wheelchair and stow it aft. He returned to fasten McElroy's seat belt, strapping himself into a seat on the aisle one space away.

They taxied to their assigned runway and went through final checkout, each engine revving up in turn, before they took off. McElroy imagined the Trident fading up on radar, a dusty pip on a grey-green scope, and thought of reels of tape recording their in-flight communications.

The aircraft banked in a wide loop and began its climb to corridor altitude. The NO SMOKING light went off, and McElroy asked the enlisted man to light him a cigarette. He inhaled gratefully, leaning back in his seat to watch the smoke as he blew it out. It reminded him he was still alive, evidence of his own breathing.

There but for the grace of God, he thought, and a sudden shame clutched at him, like the hand of a drowning man.

FICTION

NOBODY STEALS A GRAVESTONE



William T.
Lowe



When I heard a step on the porch and a knock on the door, I thought it would be Charlie Hartman with an armload of deer hides. But it was the Widow Reilly, a tearful expression on her face. As usual she was dressed in black with a black hat and veil.

"It's sorry I am to bother you, Mr. Sessions," she said. "It's about poor Collin." She gave a sob and pressed a handkerchief to her mouth. "His gravestone's been stolen."

I was sure I'd misunderstood her, I had never heard of a gravestone's being taken, but I held the door open for her and said, "Please come in, Mrs. Reilly."

She declined a chair and stood in the middle of the floor facing me. I didn't know her very well, but I'd heard she was raised in an Irish foster home. She stood a bit over five feet tall, was quite slender, early forties, had big blue eyes. Her name was Bridget, but most people reduced it to Birdie.

"Stolen you say?" I asked.

"Aye. Taken right off his grave," she said with another sob. "May he rest in peace," she added automatically. A hint of the Emerald Isle was in her voice.

"When did it happen?"

"Mrs. Flannigan, she that has the plot next to ours, was to the cemetery this morning and noticed the stone was gone. She ran home to tell me." The handkerchief came up to stifle more sobs. "The poor man! His grave marker taken from him . . ."

"That is too bad," I said lamely. Even up here in the Adirondacks we have occasional cemetery vandalism by high school punks—flowers torn up, markers overturned, spray painting done. But I couldn't believe that a gravestone, which might weigh over two hundred pounds, would be taken.

"Did you tell the police, Mrs. Reilly?"

"Aye, I did. Then I come to you, Mr. Sessions, seeing as how we're neighbors."

I'd never thought that our living on the same side of town would make us neighbors, but Fountain is a very small village. And since I'm a retired deputy sheriff, people come to me with their problems.

"I'm sure the sheriff will handle it," I said. "Where did you get the stone, Mrs. Reilly?"

"I got it from Fountain Memorials," she said, "off of Mr. Kevin Murray."

I could've guessed that. Kevin Murray does all the memorial business in this half of the county.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Reilly, but was the stone paid for?" I know from experience that money is the root of most problems.

"Not altogether," she said primly, "but Mr. Murray had my word on the balance." She looked at me in sudden dismay. "Oh dear me! You think he might have taken it back?"

"No, I don't. Mr. Murray wouldn't do that."

At least I didn't think so. Cars get repossessed, and furniture and



refrigerators, but I'd never heard of a gravestone's being taken back for nonpayment.

"I'll ask him," I said. I heard a thump on the porch and moved to the window in time to see Charlie's car drive away.

"I've taken enough of your time," she said politely. The handkerchief came into play again. "The poor man, no headstone . . ."

Collin Reilly's funeral had been five weeks ago. He was a cheat and a bully and a wife-beater. A stocky little Irishman who never held a steady job, he poached deer and netted perch out of season. His wife Bridget rarely came to town, ashamed to be seen with bruises on her face. His daughter Erin left home when she was sixteen.

Widowhood conveyed a wonderful new social status on Bridget Reilly. Nobody had set foot in her house while Collin was alive. Now people came to call. The ladies of St. Agnes fussed over her, invited her to church affairs; asked her to sing in the choir. The manager of the Grand Union carried her groceries out to her car. After so many years of abuse and solitude, she blossomed in the glow of deference and respect.

"It did my heart good to see the change in that woman," my cousin Emily said the last time she had me into town for lunch. "She still wears black, but what does that hurt?"

Mrs. Reilly seemed to be waiting for me to say something consoling about her latest bereavement, the loss of the headstone.

But I didn't feel any sympathy for poor Collin, with or without his headstone. I did what lawmen usually do when there's nothing else to say. I passed the buck to the clergy.

"Why don't you go and see Father O'Connor? I'm sure he can make you feel more at ease . . ."

"That I will," she said with a smile. "Good day to you."

I saw her to her car, stepping over a bundle of hides on the porch. Charlie had been there, seen I had company, and gone. I would have to stand him a beer or two at the Blue Ax for his trouble. I loaded the hides with the others in my pickup.

It had to be vandalism, I told myself on the drive into Keeseville; what market could there be for a secondhand gravestone with Collin Reilly's name on it? Let the sheriff handle it. I had these hides to take care of.

This is a project my civic club takes on every year or so. We collect deer hides, have them tanned, and send them to veterans' hospitals throughout New York state. Every man who chips in a hide gets a receipt for a fifty dollar charitable donation.

Another organization buys leatherworking kits and distributes them to the hospitals. I do the paperwork, but I don't mind; I know from personal experience that making leather belts and wallets is good therapy when you're in a hospital for a long time.

"That's crazy!" Kevin Murray



said. "Nobody steals a grave-stone. It would be too much work, and there's no money in it."

"That's what I thought," I said.

After I delivered the deer hides I had nothing else to do, so I'd driven out Route 9N to see Kevin. His memorial company is out of town on the bank of the Fountain River. It was a crisp early fall day with a deep blue sky. Any day the birches would begin showing color, and then the oaks and maples.

Kevin and I stood by his shop and warehouse, a large corrugated-iron building. Lined up in the front yard were several sample memorials to show the various sizes and colors available. Like every memorial company owner in northern New York, Kevin brought his stone in from the Barre quarries in Vermont.

He and I are about the same age; he's threatening to retire now. He wears a beard without a mustache, which makes him look like a Civil War general.

"The Collin Reilly job you say?"

We went inside where he had a small office, glassed-in against the dust. He rummaged in a file cabinet.

"Yep, there's still a hunnert dollars owing on it," he told me, "but I ain't worried. You can tell Birdie that for me, Hank."

"Thanks, I will."

Kevin described the stone. It was not the popular slant-front style, but a rectangular block, the front and back polished glass-smooth. The top was a gentle serpentine curve, and the top

and the sides had the rough "pitch" texture. To match the other monuments in the cemetery plot Birdie had selected the Mountain Rose shade of granite. "I told her a monument reflects credit on the person who picks it out," Kevin said, "not the person under it. And I gave her a good price."

"What did you put on the stone, Kev? I'm curious."

He shook his head. "I generally give people a break on the inscription; don't charge for an extra word or two. I made some suggestions—you know, 'Beloved husband and father,' or 'He will be missed by all,'—but Birdie wouldn't have it.

"All she wanted was the name and the dates. I tell you I wasn't surprised, the way Collin used to knock her around."

I got to the main question on my mind. "I suppose you have a contract with your customers?"

He slid a blank form across the desk. "See right there, it says, 'Title to property remains in vendor until paid for.'" Kevin shook his head. "Nope, I didn't take that stone back, Hank. I've threatened to take 'em back a time or two, but I never have."

"Not much you can do with it anyway," I said, "someone's name on it and all."

"That's where you're wrong. All you have to do is grind a half inch or so off'n the front of the stone. You'd have to have the time and the tools, but you could use the stone again. If you weren't afraid to."



"Afraid to?"

He looked at me seriously.
"You ever hear of ghosts, Hank?"

I still don't know if he was joking or not.

I decided to stop by Birdie's to tell her that Kevin Murray had not repossessed the headstone and would wait for his money.

I detoured by St. Agnes' cemetery, trying not to think of the times I had come here to lay a friend to rest. It's a large place now, having grown around an older section with memorials dating back to 1780 and earlier. Some of those are thin slabs of stone stuck in the ground like toothpicks in a sandwich. In the old days the Irish and French-Canadians had separate Catholic cemeteries, and the Quakers and other Protestants had to do for themselves.

There was a sturdy wrought-iron fence bordering the road and a gate that always stood open. I found the Reilly plot from the section numbers Kevin had given me; it was near the end of a row just off an access road. The grave was conspicuous because the headstone was missing. Traces of the sealing compound and the plastic shims on the foundation slab showed where it had been.

There are narrow roads inside the cemetery for visitors to use, and small service paths between the plots for the caretakers with their lawnmowers and wheelbarrows. There were lots of tire tracks around but no skidmarks where

something heavy might have been dragged over the ground.

I knew it would be a waste of time, but I walked around the perimeter of the cemetery looking into the brush and under the trees where some jokers might have dumped the gravestone. Nothing.

On the way back to my car I looked at some of the more impressive memorials, the columns, the stone carved into pillows, wreaths of flowers, angels. "Don't get calls for angels any more," Kevin told me. "An angel on top of the stone meant the soul was taken up to heaven, you know."

"That so?" I said. "What about a dove?"

"That meant the departed was a Christian. A heart stood for heavenly bliss. A lamb would be for a child's marker. You know, the lamb of God . . ."

The Reilly house was a small frame dwelling inundated with flowers, a garage on one side and a small barn in the rear. In the old days a family like this would keep a milk cow and chickens and maybe a pig or two. The men worked and brought home a regular paycheck instead of a disability or unemployment allotment.

There was nobody at home. In front of the garage I saw Collin's old Jeep. I knew he'd used it for plowing snow in the winter to pick up extra money—cash, of course. I saw the plow standing against the far wall of the garage.



The 1950's Jeep was a most practical vehicle. Primitive, yes, compared to today's sport utility models. Not automatic; you shifted gears manually. It did have four-wheel drive after you got out and locked the front wheel hubs.

An arm on a hydraulic cylinder in front lifted or lowered a heavy snowplow and could be put to dozens of raising or pulling chores. There's a knob on the dash; you pull it out to raise the arm; push in to lower.

The next day was Wednesday, my day to have lunch with Emily. I learned that the missing gravestone hadn't created much of a sensation. The police had investigated, found nothing, and told the caretaker to keep the gate to the cemetery locked at night.

Widow Reilly wept and sobbed anew, but public interest had been diverted; she was now merely a bystander.

"It's them kids again. This town needs a curfew."

"Served him right. That Collin owed ever'body money."

"The police are never there when you need them . . ."

Emily held back the most important piece of news to serve me with my second slice of her strawberry-rhubarb pie. "We've got a new widow in town. Thaddeus Call dropped dead last night; his heart gave out. The ladies of the church are going over to see poor Clara this afternoon."

Thaddeus had been a veteran, husband, father, deacon, council-

man. His passing would merit flying the post office flag at half-mast. His widow was showered with pity by the whole valley.

Birdie Reilly realized she had been replaced. She put away her black garments and took occasional jobs as babysitter.

I felt sorry for Birdie when she lost her place in the sun, but something else demanded my attention. Twenty-five thousand other things to be exact—adult Manchurian pheasants. The New York Department of Environmental Conservation had a program to release the birds on private lands open for public hunting. They asked for local help.

The birds would be set out in the fall in areas where there were many cornfields, like around Peru and Coopersville. And where the pheasants could find natural cover for protection from foxes and other predators. Pheasants don't roost in trees like turkeys and other birds. There were a lot of details to be worked out to make the program a success.

We'd had our first frost when Bridget Reilly came to see me again. It was early evening, just after dinner. She was dressed in slacks and a jacket; Emily might have called it a pants suit. Her hair was neatly combed, and she held her head up. It struck me suddenly that she was a very attractive woman.

"Mr. Sessions," she began, standing stiffly erect, "I believe you are a man who can keep a secret."



I knew she was quite serious. I nodded. "I can and I have," I said.

"And I believe you know what I'm driving at."

"Yes, Bridget," I admitted. "I know you took that gravestone."

It came clear to me one day. Birdie hadn't had much of a life until she became a widow. Then she got respect and courtesies she'd never known. She'd thought spiriting away her husband's gravestone would be an encore to the funeral, would prolong the attention.

It was easy enough. The versatile Jeep was at hand, the cemetery unguarded. But though her plan was ingenious, it failed to generate more sympathy.

I could see her relax, relieved that her secret was out. Her blue eyes almost smiled at me. "But I don't know what you did with it," I said.

"It's in the barn under some old sheetrock," she said. "I want you to help me with it. It's too heavy for me."

I nodded again. "I'll be glad to help you." I tried to put her at ease. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

I got a brief smile. "Thankee, no. Let me finish. George Gillis has asked me to marry him, Mr. Sessions. I've accepted him, and I'll sell my place. When I do, somebody is bound to find that stone in the barn," she said quietly, "and that will start a lot of talk. Best to get it out of there now."

"I agree, you should." I waved at a chair; she sat down.

"You still got Collin's old Jeep?"

She nodded. "I've seen him pull fenceposts with it lots of times. But I guess you figured out that's how I did it." For a minute I saw mischief in her eyes. "I just drove up to the grave one night, pushed the arm down, got a rope around the stone, and lifted it up." She looked at me to see if I would criticize her; when I didn't, she went on. "It was late, I just drove home. Nobody saw me."

"You're thinking of putting the stone back?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, sir, I'm not. That would cause even more gossip. And the gate's locked now. If'n you help me, we'll drop it off the Union Street bridge into the river. And I'll be done with it." She paused and said, almost in a whisper, "Erin can put up a marker some day if'n she's a mind to."

There was only one other question. "When?"

"Tonight. If you're willing. The moon won't be up till after ten."

That's what we did. We left as soon as it was good dark and drove out to her house. In the barn I uncovered the headstone, put a chain around it, and lifted it with the hydraulic arm on the Jeep.

With Birdie beside me I drove to the bridge, the stone hanging over the front bumper. We didn't talk; I was trying to think of what I might say if someone saw us. At the bridge I stopped and turned off the headlights. There were no streetlights, and only a few dim stars were out.



I walked across the bridge to make sure nobody was around. Birdie had made a good suggestion; the water is deep here even at this time of year. And once on the bottom the stone would be silted over by the current.

Back in the Jeep I inched out to the center of the bridge and stopped. There are guardrails on each side of the span, but there's space underneath them. I lowered the stone to the pavement and held it propped up with a crowbar while Birdie unhooked the chain. Then I slid it to the rail.

I looked at her, and she nodded. I gave the stone one more push; it made a big splash when it hit the water. I was afraid Birdie would say something like "rest in peace," but she didn't. On the bank a night bird complained about the noise and flew away.

On the way back to her house, where I had left my car, I heard her crying softly. I pretended not to notice.

Now Birdie could get on with her life. I knew George Gillis to be a good man; they would make a fine couple. And I had to make what Birdie and I had done more or less legal. I went to see Kevin Murray and told him I wanted a wedding present.

I gave Birdie a bill of sale for the gravestone marked "Paid in full." She sent me Collin Reilly's hunting rifle, a nice Remington 30.06 with a scope. The scope alone was worth the hundred dollars I gave Kevin.

And now I know a person will steal a gravestone if he has a strong enough reason. Or if he has an Irish sense of the dramatic.

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FICTION

A Glimpse of a Distant Relative

Flonet Biltgen
Bonaventure



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 9/98

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Yashmit, son of Darashamah, merchant, caravaner, and respected citizen of Rasca, may his fortunes multiply, stood in the lengthening evening shadows outside the front gate of his home and tugged his graying beard, troubled.

The setting sun was so bright on the whitewashed wall across the street that shadows nearly obscured by contrast the thing that lay wrapped in a shabby blanket near his feet. The two bearers who had brought it stood, bored, pretending not to listen.

"How long has he been dead?" said Yashmit, his voice like a shoe scuffing gravel from years of arguing with camels—and cameleers.

"He died only today," said the festival official. "We try to be as quick as possible about these things."

"May the gods smile on the efficient. But how did he die? The festival is supposed to be a spectacle only, an honor for the gods."

The official was impatient. "It's not at all unusual for unskilled contenders to die in the festival. But I am no umpire. I am a mortician."

"But there must be some mistake. I have no relatives in the city..."

"This man is from Apta. He has named you his uncle." He consulted the clay tablet he carried. "His mother's cousin," he amended. "That makes you his sponsor. Are you ready to do your duty or not?"

Yashmit scratched his belly, uncomfortable, wondering if he should deny the corpse. It would be a very bad omen to have a corpse in the house on top of the caravan's being so long overdue. But Yashmit had always claimed not to believe in omens. And the gods smile on the consistent and lawful.

"I do have a cousin in Apta," he said. "I suppose a good citizen like myself must do his duty." He reached for the tablet and made his mark.

The official unhooked a drawstring bag from his belt and handed it over.

"These are some things he left in our keeping," he said. "They are yours to deal with now. Good evening, citizen."

He beckoned to the bearers, and they started down the street.

"Wait!" called Yashmit. "What is his name?"

The official stopped and squinted at the tablet.

"Aldo," he said and rounded a corner out of sight.

"Welcome to my home, Aldo, my cousin's son," Yashmit said quietly, the bag hanging awkwardly from his raised hand. It wasn't very heavy.

Ramat, an orphan boy whom Yashmit had taken in to serve in the parts of the house where women were inappropriate, appeared unbidden from inside the gate. "May the gods have mercy on the recently dead," he said politely.

"And on the living," said Yashmit automatically. "Help me bring

him inside. We'll put him in a stall."

"I can do it myself, master," said Ramat, bending quickly to search for a grip on the corpse's shoulders, eager to serve. "Which stall?"

"Any stall, what difference does it make?" said Yashmit irritably. They were all empty, the caravan not arrived and the festival already going on, may the gods glory in the spectacle. All those new people in town and Yashmit's goods on camelback somewhere between here and Darram.

Ramat struggled to drag the stiff body through the courtyard. Yashmit did not offer again to help, for the boy obviously wanted to do it himself. Yashmit was mildly surprised that the boy could manage the job alone. But then he must be thirteen years old by now. Maybe fourteen.

In the stable the corpse made an insignificant lump in the gathering evening gloom. Ramat stood by and waited to be commanded.

"He was my cousin's son," said Yashmit somewhat lamely.

"My condolences," said the boy, and Yashmit was touched at the sincerity in his voice. "Did you know him well?"

"No, not at all. I didn't even know my cousin had a grown son. He never came to visit me when he reached town. Not even one afternoon to make my acquaintance and share his dreams like a member of the family."

"May the gods forgive his dis-

courtesy," said Ramat. Then he knelt and before Yashmit could say a word, irreverently pulled away the shabby blanket that wrapped the corpse.

Yashmit frowned at his cousin's dead son. The man must have been a pugilist. His face was badly battered. One eye was swollen shut, and the bones around the other seemed caved in. His lips were split, and several teeth were missing. The wounds had not swelled much before he died.

Ramat pulled at the common tunic, which was ripped and torn. There were livid marks about the ribs. Lifting a stiff arm he rubbed the knuckles, which were not bruised, and showed Yashmit a rope burn around the wrist. The last two fingers were bent back and crooked.

Ramat looked up. "The gods forgive my unkind but honest mouth . . ."

"The gods always have," muttered Yashmit.

" . . . but this man was murdered."

Yashmit continued to frown at the corpse for a few moments, remembering the drawstring bag in his hand.

"Fetch a priest, Ramat. We must arrange a funeral."

Ramat tossed the blanket back over the body. "What kind of priest, master?"

Yashmit considered. "The nearest," he said.

Ramat hurried off. Alone in the stable Yashmit pulled the blanket off and searched the body. There was nothing, of

course. He gently covered the young man again. "Ah, Aldo, my cousin's son. Who could have hated you so much? Or were they after something? What?"

He took the drawstring bag into his house. In the sitting room he dumped the bag on a low table and sat on a cushion to consider the contents.

Not much to mark a lifetime. A leather purse containing only three coppers. Two small webs of string knotted irregularly. A grimy kerchief of the kind camelers used to cover their nose and mouth in a sandstorm. Hooded cloak, certainly not new. Silver eagle on a neckchain, of modest value. Short dagger in a leather wrist scabbard.

Yashmit untangled the string webs and with a practiced familiarity spread one among the fingers of one hand.

A map. But a most complicated one and not immediately familiar. Yashmit frowned in concentration.

A map must start somewhere. Like this large knot at the edge of the web. And end somewhere else. The intermediate strings told the relative direction of some other known place. A knot might mean a village or an oasis or a mountain. And the distance from the known point was told by the number of knots at the end of the direction string.

There, five knots. But that might mean five steps or five leagues. Maps always needed an interpretation. Still, Yashmit considered the map confidently.

A caravaneer was a master of maps. It would give up its secret, may the gods reward the patient.

He turned the web over, and suddenly it became familiar. The desert route from Apta to Rasca. Here was Mount of the Ox, and the river Nar, and Rasca five days away. Yashmit wondered briefly at the extra knots and strings. Of course a stranger to desert travel, as Aldo had been, might want extra landmarks. But Yashmit was sure there were no landmarks in these places on the road to Apta. Ah well, some mapmakers were less than competent; still, the gods smile on an honest effort. He wadded the strings and tossed the map onto the table.

Deftly he spread the second map among the fingers of his other hand.

The city of Rasca, with the festival dormitory marked and the Temple of Irah knotted large. Yashmit hadn't realized that Irah was worshipped in Apta, but it said something of Aldo that he wanted to follow his god in a strange city.

Setting the strings aside, Yashmit toyed with the silver eagle necklace and mused. How differently his cousin's son had lived his life. Yashmit himself had married young, younger than Aldo appeared. He had inherited his father's trade, caravaneer, but not his father's guile. Too honest to bargain, Yashmit had always had to employ another to haggle for him. Fortunately the negotiator he had found to

lead his caravans was hardbitten enough to get the best price but honest enough to give a true accounting to his master. Yashmit was obliged to keep giving larger and larger bonuses to the man every year.

Nevertheless, he had managed to keep his head above water even through the several wars of the last decades, and to build this modest house in a reasonably good part of town. His wife, may her children be many, had been a beautiful girl.

But she had borne no children at all. Just a few years ago Yashmit had suddenly realized that he was in middle age and had no heir. Desperately he had taken both his wife's serving women to bed—separately and discreetly, of course. But neither of them had borne him a child either, confirming his fear that the fault was not with his wife. Not with his wife.

Families in this situation often adopted a brother's child to have some blood kin to leave their wealth to. Or a cousin's. Aldo of Apta could have been Yashmit's heir. But the gods had other plans, may they ever be merciful. Yashmit sighed and considered himself. A man who formed caravans to brave the wilderness year after year, waited endlessly until they returned, then sent them out again. Trade goods moving in and out like the breath, giving a secure sameness to the years. Secure, yes. But the same.

In other words, boring.

Then Yashmit considered Aldo of Apta. A few possessions that showed him to have lived barely above beggar status; the fact that he had come far from home to risk his life against prize money in the arena; that he had no friend in the city who would sponsor his gamble; and that he had lost that gamble, and his life.

"A hard death, Aldo my cousin's son," said Yashmit to the silver eagle as it revolved lazily on its chain before his eye. "But at least there was an adventure in your life. At least one. Was the adventure you enjoyed worth the price?"

No one answered him.

He put the eagle on the table and pushed the other belongings around, puzzled. Whatever Aldo's killer had wanted, it was more valuable than these.

There was a scrape from the women's door.

"Come," said Yashmit.

His wife entered, smiling. "I heard someone at the gate," she said. Yashmit smiled in return. He had no defense against her gentle demands, not since he realized that her continued barrenness meant that she'd remained faithful to him all these years, excellent woman, good friend.

He told her the story, all of it; he showed her Aldo's things. She smiled as she smiled at everything, and while she listened she toyed with her favorite bauble.

The thing in her hands was a statuette of the goddess Ummatta in her aspect of Earthmother.

"Ah, Ummatta," said Yashmit.

He took it. The goddess wore a brass necklace so delicate and cleverly worked that it chimed minutely when handled as if made of tiny bells.

He turned the worn ivory statuette in his hands nostalgically. Over the years the left arm had broken off. "Once, woman, I dared to hope the goddess would hear the bells and send us a child." Glancing shyly at her, he saw that her smile remained constant.

"Once, husband, I also dared to hope." She took the statuette back. "But who knows? The Earthmother may still send us something, if not a child." The clever little necklace tinkled pleasantly.

She was examining Aldo's knotted strings when they were interrupted by Ramat.

"Master," said the boy with a bow. "The priest has arrived. He wanted five coppers for a cremation with robe and box, but I bargained him down to two with the old blanket and a board."

"Did you?" Yashmit chuckled and pushed Aldo's three coppers toward the boy. "Here is the fee, and a copper for the negotiator."

Ramat bowed his thanks, eyes sparkling.

Yashmit smiled slightly. "Ah, I see there is something else. Can it be your sharp ears have discovered a bit of news?"

Ramat bowed eagerly. "The gods be praised, the war between Mordache and Arronaset is over."

"Praise the gods indeed," said Yashmit. "Maybe trade beyond

Apta can soon begin again. 'Who won the war?'"

"Arronaset," said Ramat. "Mordache is sacked completely. Even the temples are destroyed, and the seven statues of Esset are missing."

"Esset?" said Yashmit. "Yes, I've heard of the famous seven statues. Solid gold crusted in gems. But small enough to steal, apparently."

"Each is small enough to carry in one hand," said Ramat. "It is said that any one is worth a man's soul."

"And that is the price after all," said Yashmit. "The things are sacred to a god. Esset will have his revenge without doubt."

"If Esset is careless or weak enough to allow his temple to be sacked and his images stolen, maybe not."

"May the gods forgive your blasphemous tongue," said Yashmit.

"Or perhaps Esset allowed the images to be removed," said Ramat, caught up in the adventure. "Were there not as many poor in Mordache as any other city?"

"The poor are without number anywhere," said Yashmit, confused. "So what?"

"So maybe, if there is indeed a god called Esset, he would rather his priests feed the poor than make golden statues. Maybe this Esset intends the treasure to enrich some worthy person."

"Like the thieves?"

"Ah—" Ramat was now the confused one.

Yashmit almost smiled. "What is this Esset the god of, anyway?"

Ramat's eyes drifted around the room. "I'm not sure," he said. "Fate, I think. Or Justice."

"Very nearly the same thing," said Yashmit.

"It was not through justice Esset's temple was sacked."

"It is not necessary that we understand the gods, son of a dyspeptic camel," said Yashmit sternly. "You may be sure that if this Esset allowed his images to be removed from the temple he has a plan for those involved, and they will certainly not escape it."

"I thank my teacher and master for his most valuable lessons," said Ramat soberly. "Still, this is not Mordache."

"You think Esset's power may not extend to Rasca?"

Ramat shrugged. "No one here thinks of Esset. Why should Esset think of anyone here?"

Yashmit frowned. "You are an irreverent scamp, Ramat. My advice is to honor all the gods. Just in case. And if one should favor you, be very, very grateful. The gods know it happens infrequently enough." He glanced at the statue of Ummatta.

Yashmit turned to his wife. "I find I am reluctant to end such a unique day so early," he said. "I bid you goodnight, wife, and I am going to visit the alehouse."

Yashmit seldom visited the public houses. His wife cocked an eyebrow but said nothing.

Almost disappointed that she didn't argue with him, Yashmit rose and tucked his sash neatly into his trousers.

"Here, Ramat, put these things

that were Aldo's back in their bag." He handed the knotted strings to the boy.

"Maps?" said Ramat.

Yashmit frowned. "Does my relative's business concern you?"

Ramat bowed, a stricken look on his face. "Don't be angry, master. I learn the details of your trade only to know how to serve you better."

Yashmit continued to frown but was not angry. Ramat was a good boy, and loyal. "Well, never mind," he said. "Put these things in the sitting room."

Eager to please, and glad not to be in trouble, Ramat cleared the table.

The next morning, Yashmit rose to find something wrong with the sun; it was too bright, painfully so. He called Ramat to close the drapes and discovered they were already closed. Groaning, he made the best of his breakfast of strong coffee and fruit.

As he was cursing the dogspawn who had sold his cook rat droppings in place of coffee—and being reminded by the stooped and aged cook that he himself was the coffee importer in the city—Ramat announced a guest.

The young man who rose to meet Yashmit in the sitting room was well-dressed. His tunic was fitted and clean, belted with yards of bright silk tied in a dashing flare at the side.

"I am Yashmit, Darashamah's son, of Rasca and the Wide Desert," he said formally, his voice

rougher and deeper even than usual in the morning.

"May the blessings of this house multiply," said the stranger politely. "I am Holgar of Amstil Across the Sea."

"Across the sea?" said Yashmit stupidly.

"I have come to test myself in your city's excellent festival," said the young man. His teeth were bad in his open smile, but he spoke well although with a pronounced accent.

"Ah, a Gamesman. May your skill be great and your luck unusual." It wasn't a very good blessing, but it was the best Yashmit could manage this morning. "Ramat." He clapped his hands, but not too loudly. "Coffee."

Head pounding, Yashmit tried to remember the duties of a host. Their correct and pointless opening conversation seemed to be going all right until Holgar inquired about the caravan routes this time of year, and Yashmit frowned in irritation at the gaffe. Everyone in town knew his caravan was overdue, and if it never arrived, Yashmit was in for a bad year.

Sensing his own tactlessness, Holgar changed the subject.

"I met a relative of yours in the festival. Aldo."

Yashmit took a deep breath of coffee fumes and tried to focus. "My cousin's son," he said non-committally.

"I am as deeply grieved as you by his tragic death. He was a fine man. Though not so well-off as his uncle."

"His means were none of my affair," grumbled Yashmit, irritated at the slur. "He didn't even present himself at my door until after he was dead."

"He wasn't here? He didn't visit you before he died?"

"No, may the gods forget his lack of courtesy. I didn't even know he was in the city. I didn't even know he was alive."

"But his body was brought to you. Forgive my abruptness, may my tongue burn for forty days." He leaned forward, eyes intense. "In my own anxiety about the festival, I gave something to Aldo to keep for me. Something I would very much like to have again. I wonder . . ."

"Yes, his things were delivered to me," said Yashmit, pouring himself another cup of coffee. "There wasn't much."

"The thing is not without value. Because it's of significance to my god, I am forbidden to discuss it except in the most vague terms. But your discerning eye will have noticed it among Aldo's poor things." He stared intently at Yashmit.

In other words, interpreted Yashmit muzzily, any valuable thing among Aldo's possessions was his. And this remarkable speech was delivered without so much as the flick of an eye. Yashmit, who had not inherited his father's easy tongue, always admired a good liar.

"Have you ever considered working the caravan routes?" said Yashmit.

Holgar blinked. "What?"

Yashmit waved his hand. "Never mind. Ramat."

The boy appeared instantly from around a screen.

"Fetch me the cloth bag that was Aldo's."

Ramat hesitated, then stepped around Yashmit and took the bag from a shelf easily within arm's reach. Of course. Yashmit had told him last night to put it in the sitting room.

Refusing to be embarrassed, Yashmit pushed the coffee tray aside and dumped the few items on the table. He disentangled the chain of the eagle necklace from the knotted strings and handed it over. "Is this the gem?" he said.

Holgar's eye passed over the necklace so fast it might have been a noodle. "No, no, it's . . ." He seized the bag and crushed it, feeling for something else.

His disappointment was genuine. Then he sat back, hands drooping in his lap, face clouding with anger.

Suddenly Yashmit was afraid of this Gamesman. "I assure you I would scorn to rob the dead," he said in a low voice.

"I know," said Holgar. "If this thing had passed through your hands, I would be able to see it in your eyes. No one would be unmoved, as you obviously are. You never touched it."

Holgar rose to his feet, his eyes glazed. He began to pace.

"Aldo, you dog's son," he muttered, one fist clenched in front of him. "You think you've outsmarted me! You camel's spit! You pig's bladder!" More invective

followed in a foreign language. Then suddenly Holgar recovered himself.

"Forgive me, gracious host," he said, making a patently insincere gesture of deference toward Yashmit. "Your cousin's son was a great comic. He has played a little trick on me. Of course, I know now where my property is." Fire came into his eye, and he clenched his fist again. "Oh yes. I know."

Yashmit experienced a shiver of dread.

Holgar's leavetaking was as brief as courtesy allowed. Clearly the man had a job to do, may the gods smile on all honest undertakings.

As Ramat cleared the coffee, he said, "Sir, two men met your guest in the street. They were roughly dressed, not like him."

Yashmit blinked and finally said, "You're a good boy, Ramat."

The lad flushed and lowered his eyes.

As Ramat hurried out, Yashmit wondered briefly, not for the first time, if, had he had a son, that boy would have been as clever as Ramat. But he dismissed the notion. Thoughts of his nonexistent heir were depressing. And along came Aldo, who apparently had had the courage and guile a merchant caravaneer needed. But at the same moment that Yashmit had realized his cousin in Apta had a son who might be an heir, the hope was murdered. Such is life; praise all the gods and keep your head down.

Thoughtfully he began to play with Aldo's knotted strings. Maybe his cousin had other sons. To come from Apta they would need better maps than these. He wadded them again and stuffed them back into the bag.

It was an hour after lunch, give or take a shadow, and Yashmit was in the stable assuring himself for the millionth time the bales of straw on hand were adequate for his tardy camels when Ramat announced another visitor.

His morning headache almost gone, Yashmit entered the sitting room.

... and encountered a fox. At first glance Yashmit knew this was a soldier, a fighter, and maybe much worse.

He called himself Telyash, laughed easily and often, and had politely left his curved sword leaning against the doorjamb. He had a way of keeping his hand on the hilt of his dagger, and a way of lifting his chin, that kept Yashmit tense. But at the same time there was something so wild, so free about him—Yashmit was charmed in spite of himself.

And chilled. Winds of death swept around this young man, and he was comfortable within that storm.

"I knew your cousin's son," he said, finally getting to the point.

"Ah," said Yashmit carefully, hopeful that he was about to find out something more about his dead relative, may the gods reward the patient. "But how

strange that arriving in a new city and knowing he had relatives here he did not call on me."

"Not so strange," said the fierce young man, smiling, "if you consider that Aldo only came here to find me. He enrolled for the festival because at this time the city is full and there is no lodging for strangers. But as a Gamesman he was entitled to a pallet in the dormitory until the festival is over."

"Ah. And to participate in the festival he must be a resident or have a relative in town. So. My name."

"So," said Telyash.

"But he could have stayed with me," said Yashmit, irritated at the whine in his voice. "Just a cup of coffee in the afternoon—"

"He was afraid," said Telyash. "I think he tried to keep what he feared away from you."

Yashmit frowned. "He knew he had enemies, then."

"Make no mistake, Aldo was no fool," said Telyash. "But neither was he afraid of deep water. Some said he was reckless, but I know he never built a stable without first counting the horses."

"You claim to know my relative's mind very well," said Yashmit, sipping his coffee.

Telyash smiled. "Aldo and I worked together more than once. Though more successfully in the past."

"But he was hardly more than a boy," said Yashmit.

"Indeed," said Telyash. "The love of adventure bites some early. Aldo was not one to be content

with a common life. Such people usually find what they are looking for. And sometimes more than that."

"There has been war on the far side of Apta. Could this trouble have come with Aldo from there?"

Telyash shook his head, one hand clasping the haft of his dagger naturally and unconsciously. "No, I don't think Aldo had any part in the war. He fenced only with his wits. Sometimes he chose more formidable opponents than most sane men would risk dealing with, true. But killing was not to his taste, and those cities were as far from Apta as Apta is from here."

Telyash shifted on the cushions, making himself comfortable, or making a decision. Leveling a hawk's stare at Yashmit, he continued. "Two days ago Aldo asked me to find someone who could be trusted to resell an item and who would not ask questions. Or tell tales. It made me think that he might have, ah, acquired something valuable."

"Are you accusing my cousin's son of theft?" said Yashmit.

"Aldo was no thief," said the young man earnestly. "If this thing was not his honestly, then be sure it came to him from hands more soiled than his own. But I don't know what it is or how he got it, and I don't care. All I want is to offer my services to the present owner of the item. For, you see, I have found such a man."

The caravan trader was suddenly awake in Yashmit. "But

Aldo was a pauper," he said. "I have his things, and they are all but worthless."

Telyash held up his hand. "We don't need to waste time like that, uncle of my friend. Yesterday Aldo didn't meet me as we'd arranged. Fearing the worst, I went today to the festival dormitory where he stayed. I found out he was dead and delivered here. And another thing. Someone else is looking for Aldo. Someone ungentle, for a festival official today was found dead. Beaten to death."

Yashmit's hands clasped and unclasped themselves, though he willed them to be still. He was looking for advantage with an opponent who refused to fence. This visitor was no merchant; he was a killer. That probably meant he was telling the simple truth, unused to the necessity of bargaining for whatever he wanted. Still, Yashmit wished he'd asked Ramat to stand by, though the youth would be little good in a fight, especially against such a one as this.

"Listen and believe," said Telyash easily. "You are in trouble now. Whoever killed Aldo, and maybe an official of the festival, will not hesitate a third time."

Yashmit spread his disobedient hands. "Friend of my cousin's son, I am telling the truth. Aldo came here with barely enough to bury himself with." He tried to put into his ruined voice all that natural honesty that both made him a trusted merchant and a less successful one than might have been.

Telyash seemed to believe it this time. He thought a moment. "But then, Aldo would not carry such a thing around. He must have hidden it somewhere. Could there be a clue among his things?"

Yashmit gazed levelly into those feral eyes for several moments, gathering his thoughts. Then he rose, found the drawstring bag, and pawed it open clumsily; oh, a man with a hang-over could be astonishingly clumsy. Finally he dumped it on the table between them.

"This is what he owned," he said folding his hands into his sleeves and hiding there the two string maps.

Telyash hefted every item, turned everything over, examined every surface. "This is everything?" he asked. "This junk? Aldo was not killed for these."

"There was also a cloak, but it's rags," said Yashmit, not meeting his eye. "And the tunic he was cremated in."

Telyash held the kerchief to the light. "There is a kind of writing known in the south that can be done on cloth. It is invisible until heated. Do you know that trick?"

"No," said Yashmit. "But we'll try it. Ramat!"

A candle was brought, but the kerchief revealed nothing. The shabby cloak was brought and tried over the candle, too, and even the bag itself, but there was nothing.

"So. If Aldo indeed had such a bauble, it would seem to be lost," said Yashmit.

"So it would seem," said Telyash, eyeing his host.

"So. That's the end of Aldo's story," said Yashmit. "A life gamely lived and truly done. Permit me to toast my cousin's son with you in friendship. We may be the last to do it. Ramat, wine."

Yashmit poured the wine himself, toasted Aldo discreetly, and waited for Telyash to be done with his visit. He avoided the young man's eye as much as he could and made sure to be smiling when he could not.

Finally Telyash was heading for the door. "I am at the Sign of the Black Hawk. Ask for me by name if you should want me for something."

He picked up his curved sword from where he had left it against the door and passed one hand over its length with great familiarity. "I have other friends. They could be your friends, too. If they were needed. And if your coin is as honest as your heart."

"May all the gods smile on your generous offer," said Yashmit with great cordiality.

And Telyash was gone.

Alone, Yashmit pulled Aldo's knotted strings out of his sleeve.

"Oh, Aldo, my cousin's frightened son," he muttered. "Have you remembered your relatives after all?" He spread the string webs among his fingers and contemplated them closely, thinking about his overdue caravan and the prospect of poverty during the next year.

Ramat was back in the room shortly. "No one was waiting for

him, sir, and he traveled three streets without looking back.”

“Good work, Ramat,” said Yashmit absently. He continued to study the strings. His headache was coming back. One map was Rasca with the temple of Irah—who was not worshipped in Apta—shown large.

And the other map. The other map.

He sighed.

“This is a poor house,” he muttered finally. “With no sons or daughters to make it rich. I have been an honest man all my life and have made the best living I could, such as it is. But there are other ways to make a fortune. Dangerous ways filled with adventure. A man with no sons or daughters might try those ways, why not? If he had the courage. Or the need. As Aldo seems to have tried to do.”

He looked up at Ramat standing patiently by. “Was he indeed rich, even for a moment? Did he really have some very valuable thing? Whether or not, someone believed he did, and he was killed for it. Murder is so foul a crime, how valuable would such a thing have to be to drive a man to such a deed?”

“Esset,” said Ramat promptly.

Yashmit, who had not been expecting an answer, blinked at him stupidly.

“The statues of Esset that are missing from the temple in Mor-dache,” said Ramat. “People who would rob the gods would not hesitate to do murder to recover the stolen item.”

“You so clearly know the criminal mind?” growled Yashmit in his camel driver’s voice. “And which god gave you to know that Aldo robbed not the temple but the thieves?”

Ramat shrugged. “From all we know, Aldo was alone, which is probably why he was so easily killed; no man alone could have taken seven statues from the temple, no, not even one. Also, while he was an adventurer, he seems to have been an honest one, and no fool.”

“Honest? Would not an honest man have to return the statue to its rightful owner?”

Ramat smiled. “But with the temple sacked and the priests dead, and even the worshippers routed, where shall it return?”

“And is Aldo’s death not proof that Esset is following his image and eager for revenge?”

“No, master. Or no one would be trying to recover it. Everyone who handled it before Aldo would also be dead, and apparently they are not, since you have shared coffee with one here in this house.”

“So,” said Yashmit. “You see my would-be heir as a thief truly, but an honest one. Indeed. Your logic is almost compelling. I suppose you can discover a reason to believe this adventure will not harm my humble house.”

“May the gods forgive my insolent mouth, but I disagree with your description, master. This is the richest house in Rasca, for there is peace here, and enough for all.”

Yashmit frowned and looked Ramat up and down. The boy bore his stare easily. Ramat was a good boy. A valuable servant.

Yashmit sighed, looking at the maps again. "Esset," he said. "That would change everything. Not only the appetites of men are involved, but maybe the will of the gods. The price goes up."

He folded the strings into one fist. "Peace is indeed worth something as you point out, insolent camel-son," he said. "And only a fool would throw away peace for a dangerous promise. I may not be the richest merchant in Rasca, but up to now at least, I have not often been a fool."

He handed Aldo's strings to Ramat. "Put these back in the bag," he said. "I must think on this." He rubbed his head where there was a nagging ache.

The shadows were long and Yashmit was wondering if he had time for a nap before dinner when Ramat bowed his way into the room.

"What is it?" said Yashmit, thinking of his bed.

"There is another guest."

Yashmit sighed. "Well, we've had the thief and the murderer already. Who this time?"

"A lady, sir."

The sitting room was in shadow now, and cool. The woman seated nervously on his cushions was dressed in widow's white. Her hair was covered chastely.

Behind her stood a lean, muscular man. His chest was bare except for a black sash that went

over one shoulder and was tied in a drape-knot at the waist. His face was veiled. He was *ohsah*, invisible. The lady's bodyguard. Very proper. Yashmit pretended he was not there.

As they went through the formal ritual of greeting, Yashmit noticed a trace of paint left in the corner of one eye; the lady was no widow. She was not even a lady. But a guest was a guest, and Yashmit was curious.

"What can I do for you, daughter?"

She looked pleadingly into his eyes. "Oh, noble sir, help me! As you can see, I am in mourning." She lowered her eyes as if in shame. "Not for a husband. But one who might have been. The one love in my life. One who was so good, so giving, so . . ."

In spite of himself Yashmit almost laughed. "Do you mean Aldo?" he said.

Her eyes lit. "Oh, the sound of his name brings me close to the angels! Sir . . . among Aldo's things—I'm embarrassed to mention it, but a token. Worthless, but it would mean so much . . ."

"A silver eagle on a chain, perhaps?" said Yashmit.

She shook her head. "A—a bit of string, with knots tied in it." She lowered her eyes. "Love knots."

"Love knots. You want . . . Ah. Of course. Of course." Yashmit's cooperativeness knew no bounds. "I will fetch it for you myself."

He rose and turned to the shelf where Aldo's drawstring bag lay, reached past it and lifted the cov-

er from a shallow bowl. Glancing inside he selected two webs of string and held them out to the woman.

She snatched them both, stuffed them into her bosom, and clutched her clothing over her breast with both hands.

"Lord, you are too kind," she said, a look of triumph barely masked by her downcast eyes. "It means so much to me . . ."

"No, no, never mind," said Yashmit.

"May the gods multiply your fortune," she mumbled as Yashmit ushered her out followed by the *ohsah* bodyguard. When the gate was closed behind them, Yashmit breathed a sigh of relief.

He had finished the last of the coffee when Ramat slipped into the room. "They met two men, sir, roughly dressed."

"Like the men this morning?"

"Just like. They seemed to argue with her, a coin was passed, and she left in a different direction."

"Good. Gods grant that I am now done with my cousin's difficult and puzzling son."

The shadows were lengthening toward dusk when a weary and still troubled Yashmit called again for his servant.

"Ramat," he said, "I need someone to backtrack the caravan route to Darram."

Ramat smiled and shook his head. "Don't worry about the caravan, master."

"The gods will forgive your lack of concern. It's not your car-

avan. Here, take this coin. Go to Samulot's and hire Uzzah to do the job."

Ramat shrugged and bowed. "If you insist, master."

"Insolent whelp of a mutinous camel, I don't know why I put up with your disobedient mouth. On your way." Yashmit looked out into the garden. The shadows were long. Long enough. "May it please the gods," he muttered, "I am going to bed."

A dream of empty desert and camel ribs sticking above a dry dune . . .

Then, something over his nose and mouth, rough hands on his body. Struggling out of the dream, trying to breathe, unable to scream, Yashmit was roughly jerked upright. Stronger arms pinned his to his sides. Then a quiet "shhh" and the prick of a dagger point under his chin stopped his struggles.

Whispers; shadows moving in the dark; someone struck a spark above an oil lamp near the door.

A man behind Yashmit held a hand over his mouth and encircled his upper body with his other arm. The man with the dagger backed off, gesturing to Yashmit to be silent. And turning away from the oil lamp was . . .

Holgar, the Gamesman from across the sea.

Holgar stared at Yashmit, his face tight with anger, reached inside his tunic, and brought out a handful of knotted strings.

He moved close to whisper in Yashmit's face. "So Aldo had

maps," he said. His breath was bad. "You knew they were maps when we talked. But I didn't know it until after."

He clenched the strings in his fist and shook it. "These you gave the woman are common things. These are not Aldo's maps. But I will have them now. And by all the gods, you will lead us to the place they mark." He leaned even closer, staring.

Frightened, Yashmit closed his eyes, but not being able to see Holgar was even more frightening. He opened them again.

"And you do know the place, don't you, camel spawn?" said Holgar. "I see it in your eyes."

He motioned to the unseen man who held Yashmit, and that one removed his hand from Yashmit's mouth.

"Speak," whispered Holgar. "Where are the maps?"

Yashmit opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He tried to swallow but couldn't manage that, either.

He tried again. "May the gods have mercy," he whispered. "Aldo made the map. And he never visited my home . . ."

So quickly that Yashmit didn't see it coming, Holgar struck him on the corner of his left eye.

Shocked, Yashmit realized Holgar had knocked him down only when the man behind him pushed him upright again. No one had ever hit him before in his entire life. Some part of his mind noticed that the pain was minor; worse was the astonishment, the unbelievable violation. He held

one hand to the bruise and stared at Holgar open-mouthed.

"Careful," whispered the man behind Yashmit. His breath was also bad. "Remember Aldo."

"Aldo!" said Holgar. "I would kill him twice more, may his soul burn in every hell!" He seized Yashmit's upper arm roughly. "Play no more games with me, little man, or I will show you the lesson Aldo died to learn!"

Yashmit nervously plucked at the blanket that had wrapped itself around his naked body in his brief struggle, noticed his nervous hands and willed them to be still. He drew a deep breath, dizzy with a reckless arrogance.

"I have been an honest man all my life," he said, surprised that his voice was steady. "They say the gods reward the honest. So let this be in the hands of the gods. The maps are still in the drawstring bag on the shelf in my sitting room."

"I rejoice that you have more wisdom than your relative," said Holgar. "But I care nothing for your honesty or your gods."

"And that will tell the difference," muttered Yashmit gruffly.

Holgar motioned to the man with the dagger, and he slipped out of the room. Moments later he was back, Aldo's bag in his hand. Holgar snatched it away from him, plunged his hand in, and came up with the two wads of string.

Just then there was a sound from outside the door, a small sound like a knuckle bumping wood, or an elbow against a wall.

The man with the dagger hurried back through the door, knife ready. Everyone was still. Yashmit was sure he could hear the sweat beading on his own face.

The daggerman stepped back into the room. "I see no one, but I don't like it," he said.

Holgar nodded agreement and jerked his thumb toward Yashmit. "Bring him," he said.

Yashmit opened his mouth to speak, but the man behind quickly stuffed a rag into it. The two ruffians tied something around Yashmit's whole face and trussed him so thoroughly in his own blanket that he could scarcely move. Then he was lifted, and a jolting race began.

The wrapping on his face made it difficult to breathe, impossible to see. The rag in his mouth tasted like horse sweat. The men struggled only slightly with Yashmit's weight and jogged briskly along the night streets of Rasca.

Finally he was dumped onto a dirt floor. The rag was whisked off his face. Struggling a little, he loosened one arm from the blanket enough to remove the horse rag from his mouth.

Holgar had lit a lamp. They were in a room bare of all furniture. Something was heaped in the corners, but the light was so uncertain that Yashmit saw only shadows.

Holgar turned to him now, and Yashmit's bruised eye throbbed as if in panic. It was beginning to swell closed. He felt exhausted. So this was adventure.

Holgar produced Aldo's maps,

squatted, stretched one between his two hands, and held it out toward Yashmit.

"So?" he said. "Read to me, my wise friend."

"And the will of every god be done on it," said Yashmit. He pointed to the map, ashamed that his hand trembled.

"You see, this part is the way from Apta to Rasca. But there are too many strings. Almost as if two maps were tied in one web."

Someone behind Yashmit let out his breath in a long "ahhh."

Yashmit continued. "Aldo's other map shows the Temple of Irah, on the Street of Dogs. I am an ignorant and humble stay-at-home ..."

"Stop that," said Holgar dangerously.

"... but—but I don't think Irah is honored in Apta. So why is Aldo interested?"

"You are ignorant indeed if you think your life is long enough to contain riddles," said Holgar with some heat. "Speak or die, you are not the only map reader in Rasca."

Yashmit tried again to swallow.

He pointed briefly to the map Holgar held, dropping his hand quickly so he didn't have to see its trembling. "I think this hidden map is a floor plan of the temple," he said.

Holgar's eyes widened. "A map of a single building?"

Someone behind Yashmit laughed, and a hand seized his arm roughly. "Take us there quickly!" said a voice.

Yashmit was pulled upright, clutching his blanket around his body. His knees were a little weak, but he managed to keep his feet as he was pushed out into the empty street. The setting moon showed him enough for him to recognize the poorer eastern section of town. He had never realized how large Rasca was, and how long a journey from that quarter to the Temple of Irah could be on a dark, unfriendly night.

The Temple of Irah was never locked. It was a place of refuge, and there was always a bank of the homeless sleeping inside its generous courtyard. As Holgar's man pushed Yashmit through the archway, several ragged bodies stirred, but no one rose. Yashmit knew that none of these would interfere no matter what happened, nor would any of them remember anything in the morning.

Holgar thrust the strings at Yashmit. "So? Read."

Yashmit took the strings, holding up the blanket with his elbows, and squinted in the temple twilight. He glanced around at the doors and arches, consulted the strings again. "That way," he said.

The knots directed them across the courtyard, along a roofed walkway where occasional votive lamps burned, and into an inner courtyard out of which a small stream was directed along an artificial brick stream bed. Yashmit led them to the fountain that was the source of the stream.

"This seems to be the place," said Yashmit.

One of Holgar's men advanced to the edge of the fountain, a bricked oval surrounding a natural spring. He put one hand in the water and ran it around the edge, feeling.

Yashmit glanced about cautiously. The courtyard was closed on three sides by a high brick wall and open along the fourth by a series of arches. Two oil lamps burned stutteringly on short pedestals on either side of the spring, casting horrible, deformed shadows of them all that wove in macabre dance across the courtyard tiles.

"Aha!" said the man at the fountain.

He pulled out a sodden bundle, one large handful. The others turned to look.

Yashmit took two backward steps toward the arches, then turned to run. A rough hand caught the blanket and jerked him off his feet. He sat down hard on the courtyard bricks.

"Leaving, my friend?" said Holgar.

The thieves formed a circle around him, one with the soggy bundle clutched to his belly. Yashmit opened his mouth to retort, but to his surprise, he laughed. He drew a quick breath to quiet himself.

But laughter continued, from the direction of the arches. Holgar's three companions turned that way. Knives were drawn.

The figure in the archway moved into the dim courtyard,

and Yashmit recognized Telyash, Aldo's soldier friend. He was breathing hard, his head was bare, and his face was animated with something more than a hard run through the darkness.

"Stand aside," said Holgar. "You have no business here."

Telyash lifted his chin. "It is you who will stand aside," he said in a voice sure and chilling. "Hand that packet to my friend on the ground and I will let you go."

Holgar laughed. "Come show us what you'll let us do," he said. His two companions started forward.

Telyash drew his sword, slowly, forever, the blade sighing as it came.

Holgar's men halted, uncertain. Seeing them pause, Holgar frowned. "But there is no need for us to fight," said Holgar in a reasonable tone of voice. "I can offer you a part share; there's still enough to satisfy the rest of us."

"What kind of share?" said Telyash.

Holgar barely hesitated. "As many coins as you can hold in one hand. A good payment for only standing aside."

"Indeed," said Telyash. "An unbelievable payment from such a small thing."

"It's priceless," said Holgar.

Telyash twitched the point of his sword. "Nothing is priceless. To prove it I will buy the thing from you now. The price I offer is your three lives. Take it or leave

it." His voice was cold and merciless, like the desert night. Yashmit shivered.

"He is one man," said the man on Yashmit's right, passing his knife from hand to hand nervously.

"He has a sword," said the man with the bundle. "It takes a long time to heal a sword cut. And this thing is not very heavy." Deliberately he tucked his knife back in his belt.

Holgar jerked his head toward the man. "It's solid gold."

The man hefted the bundle slightly, never taking his eyes off Telyash. "I don't think so," he said, and without warning he tossed the bundle to Holgar.

Holgar grabbed at it, and all eyes turned to him. Only Yashmit saw Telyash coming. He prudently scrambled out of the way.

It was over in moments, and Yashmit was surprised at how quietly it was done. The sound of a sword striking a human neck made a much smaller sound than it should. Even Holgar, whose head was nearly severed, made no more noise than a gargle. Part of Yashmit marveled at the speed and strength of Telyash's arm.

Another part of him was horrified, but he held that part in check.

The man who had kept his knife was on his knees, cursing steadily, grasping a gaping slash across his forearm that would not stop bleeding no matter how he pressed it. The other, who had thrown the bundle, stood apart, unhurt, his arms spread.

The man apart gestured with his still-spread hands and grinned feebly.

"So," said Telyash, his eyes bright but his voice calm. "The price I offered for the thing is still on the table: Your life. Or will we bargain?"

The man made a pushing gesture with his still openly displayed hands. "A fair price for a thing of such a weight," he said, smiling broadly now and beginning to slide sideways along the wall toward the arches.

Telyash twitched his sword-point at the man on his knees. "You?" he said.

The man moaned looking at Holgar's almost headless corpse. "Take the cursed thing. Holgar was a madman. Talk of gold and jewels, and it comes to this." He spat.

"Help your friend to his feet," said Telyash to the other man. "He seems quite overcome by the excitement."

The unhurt man grabbed the injured one by the back of his tunic, hauled him to his feet ungentily, and proceeded through the arches, glancing back at Telyash only once.

As they passed out of sight, Ramat emerged from the shadows of the arches and rushed to seize Yashmit's hand.

"All the gods be praised, may they ever protect the innocent and merciful," he said. Then he seemed to notice that he had hold of his master's hand and dropped it, embarrassed.

Yashmit laughed. He had to

hold his breath to keep the laughter from becoming hysterical. Adventure did strange things to one's emotions. He gave his hand back to Ramat. "Here, help me to my feet. I'm so tangled in this blanket that I don't think I can stand."

In fact his knees were a little shaky, but he was sure Ramat didn't notice.

"So," said Telyash. "I am satisfied they are gone." He knelt and wiped his blade on Holgar's clothing and resheathed it. Then he picked up the bundle and hefted it.

"Shall we see if this mysterious thing is worth the price that's been paid?" he said. "Our friend there may have been right. It's not very heavy."

The cloth came off in layers. No one spoke. Ramat put both hands behind his back and lifted his chin uncharacteristically. Adventure affects everyone.

Finally Telyash held the thing up in the unsteady lamplight.

"Ummatta," he said quietly. "Ivory. Not gold. One silver piece at the festival bazaar."

Then he frowned, turning the thing over in his hands. "There is an open sewer upwind of this affair," he muttered, looking down at Holgar's dead body.

He raised his gaze, and the look in his eye stopped Yashmit's breath.

Then Telyash smiled. "My good friend," he said. "Since this is not the thing so many were convinced it was, I make again the offer I made before. If you have

need to sell something quietly to one who will never remember your face, I am the man to see."

Yashmit found he could breathe again. "But I—this—" He gestured weakly with one hand to indicate his confusion.

Telyash squinted at Yashmit, and for a long moment neither spoke. Then Telyash dropped his eyes, and with a gesture of disgust he tossed the statue of Ummatta onto Holgar's body; it made a small thump and did not bounce.

He made a mock salute to Yashmit, who was worrying the blanket wrapped around his waist. "Yashmit, my friend, perhaps another time. And perhaps not." And he left through the arches as the thieves had.

Alone with Ramat, Yashmit took a deep breath and rubbed his neck, which was growing stiff, probably from the blow Holgar had given him.

"Perhaps another time, my friend," he growled. "But the gods grant not."

He glanced at the corpse lying obscenely in the lamplight. "I think we'd best be away from here," he said. He glanced almost shyly at Ramat. "I'm grateful, Ramat, that you followed me," he said awkwardly.

"I didn't exactly follow, master," said Ramat. "When I saw those rogues in the house, I ran directly to the Sign of the Black Hawk to wake the one with the sword."

"But then how did you find me?" said Yashmit, staring.

The boy dropped his eyes. "I read the maps yesterday, may the gods forgive my interference."

Yashmit chuckled. Then he laughed heartily. "Forgive? No, there's nothing for the gods to forgive. Excellent boy! You've saved my life. Come home, we'll have a mug of wine."

He started toward the arches.

Ramat stopped him with an irreverent hand on his arm.

"Wait, master. Are they gone? Truly gone? All of them?"

Yashmit turned, feeling that his eyes were open wide, his senses acute, aware of every nuance of the night. "Yes, praise every god, yes, I think they are all gone for good."

"In that case . . . you see . . . I . . ."

Ramat walked back and picked up the little statue of the goddess Ummatta and handed it to Yashmit. It had a little brass necklace so delicate and cleverly worked that it chimed minutely when handled as though made of tiny bells. The left arm was broken off.

Yashmit stared at it, a chill running up his spine. Ramat looked worried. "I told you not to worry about the caravan."

Yashmit clutched Ummatta to his chest, staring, astonished.

Ramat shifted his feet as though uncertain whether the familiar earth would remain or would open and swallow him, and maybe hopeful that it would.

"Forgive me, master," he said bleakly. "But I couldn't tell you.

These were dangerous men. And I didn't exactly lie, I only . . ." he gestured weakly " . . . concealed the truth. I had to. Forgive me, may my insulting tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, but—but you cannot lie, master."

Yashmit shook his head slowly, then more forcefully.

"Never call me that again," he said. "From now on you will call me Father."

Ramat gasped. "Father?"

Yashmit felt tears in his eyes and lowered his head and frowned to hide them. Then the frown turned into a smile. He gazed fondly at Ummatta.

"Yes, you shall call me Father. And more the fool I, to have waited so long to make my wife the mother of such a worthy son. Come." He fumbled with the

blanket, awkward and aware of it, and amused.

"Here, carry this," he said, handing Ummatta to Ramat, who was speechless for once.

"Yes," said Yashmit, rearranging the blanket. "And we'll wake my wife and have wine together like a family, and you'll tell her the whole story. May all the gods bless her, she thought Ummatta the Fertile Earth would bring us a son. Instead it was Justice."

Yashmit found it easy to laugh. He patted Ramat's shoulder fondly and guided him through the arches and out of the temple, relief washing through him with every step.

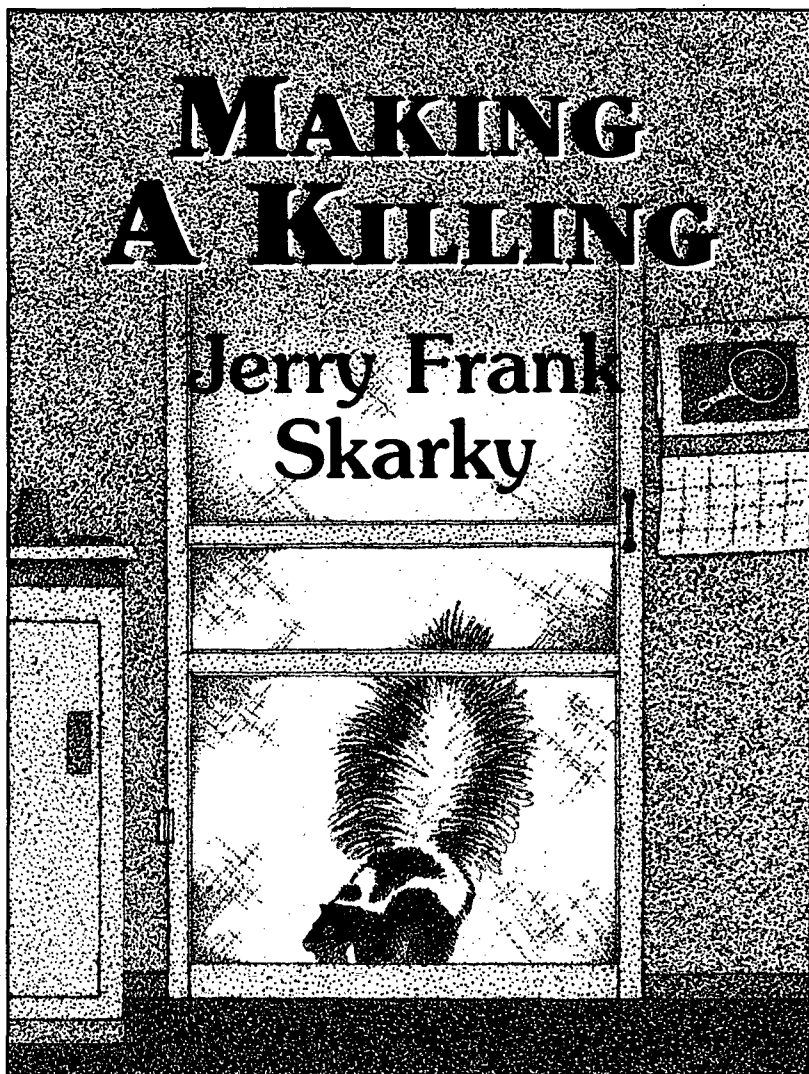
He felt renewed, reborn, like the desert after a rare winter rain.

Adventure was good when it was over. Well over.

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MAKING A KILLING

Jerry Frank
Skarky



A tan Pontiac came up behind the old man, slowed and rolled up between him on the road and the old dog lagging in the shade with his tongue out.

The driver was a young woman with a small child buckled next to her in the seat. The car was middle-aged, with rust beginning to show around the wheel wells, but the engine sounded good, and the air conditioner still worked because the young woman had to roll down the

window. "You the one having the yard sale?" she asked him, squinting at the hammer he had used to plant the sign.

"You bet," he told her. "You go on up and look around, I'll be there in a minute."

She hesitated just an instant. She seemed awfully young to have a child that age. "You want a ride?"

"Naw," he said. "Us old dogs need our exercise."

"You sure? It's Hot."

"No, ma'am, it's Oklahoma, the next state after Hot. You go on up, see anything you like, start yourself a pile."

She took off slowly, and the dog looked at him and grinned and trotted off into the wavering red dust.

Showoff, the old man thought after him.

The little girl was a cute one, wide innocent eyes staring at the accumulation of his life as if she were in a fancy store in some mall. Beside her the old dog waited patiently to be noticed.

The old man lowered himself one joint at a time into his canvas lawn chair in the shade of the tall post oak. He would have to think about it. He didn't have much for kids.

The girl's mother looked at the bottom of his cast-iron skillet.

"You don't have prices on anything," she said.

"Too much bother. Make me an offer and we'll go from there."

She wobbled the heavy skillet. "I don't have any idea what this is worth."

"It's not worth any more than you're willing to pay for it," he said.

The young woman laughed. The little girl looked at her, surprised.

"It's probably an antique," the young woman said.

"You bet it is. Doesn't mean it shouldn't be used. You need to use it, make me an offer."

"I couldn't afford more than five dollars."

"Well, that's too much. Three."

The young woman and little girl both stared at him, the little girl with two fingers in her mouth. "I feel like I should say four," the woman said, and laughed, a young girl's giggle.

"Naw, that skillet's got a sorry history, you see. It was my grandma's skillet. I was just a little older than your daughter there, she killed a skunk with it."

"What?"

"Yep, what you're holding there is without a doubt the only skunk-conking skillet in the country. Skunk came right up on the porch in broad daylight. Probably rabies, didn't have rabies shots in those days, and Old Brownie—Grandma's old dog, Brownie—he came hauling around the corner yapping his head off. But that skunk didn't turn its hind end around like a normal skunk would do, no, sir. It

bared its teeth and went right after the dog, and Grandma grabbed the skillet from the stove and the next thing I knew she had the screen door open and she threw that skillet as hard as she could . . .

"Sometimes seems like anything you do just ain't worth the getting up. Yeah, you know what I'm saying, anything you do, or try to do—sometimes the world just ain't working the way you like to see it. But Grandma hit that damn skunk right smack in the head, and I got to see that. I got to see it.

"'Course it spewed all over the place. The dog, Grandma, the porch. Took I don't know how long to get the stink out of that iron skillet. I look at the damn thing now, I still smell skunk. Probably worth about three dollars."

The little girl stretched up on her bare toes to sniff the skillet.

"That's real nice of you, but—"

"Just pass it on to your daughter when you're done with it." He winked at the little girl. "Will you remember that story about the skunk, darling?"

The little girl glanced up at her mother before she nodded her head solemnly. He nodded a little less solemnly back at her.

After the young woman paid him the three dollars and the skillet disappeared with her down the road, he went into the house for a glass of iced tea with a little Jack Daniels trickled in it. He came back out and sat in the shade and watched a hawk soar on the currents rising from the hills.

He felt better.

He was on his second glass of Jack and tea when the next car showed. He recognized it. He wished he knew more languages so he could cuss in all of them.

Mrs. Baxter got out of her car, a spotless white Buick. Mrs. Baxter was his nearest neighbor, a woman trapped in that part of middle age where children are grown and parents are dead. She had to find someone to mother hen.

She waited until she was in the shade before she jammed a thumb around each thick hip. The old dog got up and looked at her from behind the trunk of the oak.

"What are you doing here?" she asked the old man.

"Sitting heré watching the sky, having a yard sale."

"A yard sale," she repeated. She sighed forcefully, like a bellows.

"Made three dollars already. You want to buy something?"

"No, and you should be—"

"Then you get the hell off my property."

The woman's mouth opened, and her face stretched around it in disbelief and shock that never quite made it to angry.

He was smiling, but it was a smile that meant what he said.

"It's a beautiful day, Mrs. Baxter. Little warm, but a nice day to sit in the shade and talk to people. Now you go find some shade of your own and let us both enjoy it."

The corner of her mouth curled around and the muscles quivered. "You drink plenty of fluids," she said, stepping back into the sunlight.

He raised his glass. "Yes, ma'am." He enjoyed watching the Buick glide off down the road, so clean and white it repelled the dust.

Two cars came one right after the other.

The first was an old Ford with a tattered black vinyl top, in need of a tuneup and a muffler. A swarthy woman was driving. The car lurched clear up into the shade, nearly hitting his iron-wheeled garden cultivator. The swarthy woman looked around without getting out, letting the car chug.

When he spoke to her, she glared at him with glittering black eyes and popped the car into reverse. The transmission slipped and the engine revved, sending oily smoke out the tailpipe. He stared back at her, shaking his head.

The driver of the second car, a pretty blue Trans Am, had parked well behind the Ford and had his door open when the Ford's transmission caught with a clunk and the Ford bolted straight back. The second driver pulled his foot in and yanked his door shut in a hurry or the Ford would have hit it.

The swarthy woman swerved the car backwards into the yard, and the engine revved again while the second driver jumped out and yelled, "Hey!"

The transmission finally clinked, and the old Ford tore stripes through the scorched grass, fishtailing as it hit the gravel of the drive, fishtailing again through the moving wall of its own dust onto the dirt road.

The second driver was a man in his late twenties with sculpted blond hair and sunglasses the same brilliant blue as his car. "Damn," he said.

A small diamond stud glittered in his ear as he turned toward the shade. "You know her?" he asked the old man.

"Thought she was with you."

The young man grinned and began looking around.

"Hell, life wouldn't be worth diddly without some mystery now and then," the old man said. "Maybe she was lost. Be surprised how many people get themselves lost on this dead-end road."

"You got a lot of stuff out here. Getting ready to move?"

"Manner of speaking."

The young man glanced at him through the blue glasses.

"Need to pay some bills," the old man said.

The younger man nodded. "Don't we all."

"Anything in particular you looking for?"

"Always looking for something," the younger man said, moving to the card table in the shade where the smaller items were.

"But don't know what?"

"Yeah. Story of my life."

"Sounds familiar," the older man said. The ice was gone from his tea. "Take a look at that ring there, see what you think."

"This turquoise?" The younger man shifted his sunglasses to the top of his head. His eyes were a grayer blue. "Oh, the stone's broke."

"That ring wasn't made for any tourist, son. You know your turquoise? That matrix—the spidery copper mixed with the blue? That's about as rare as it gets."

"Looks old."

"It is old. Was old when I got it, been fifty years. Try her on."

"Ah, it's broke—"

"That broke piece there is worth what I'll take for the ring, but you got a steady hand and a little Super Glue, nobody ever know."

"Why didn't you ever fix it?"

The old man fell back in the chair as if he'd been pushed.

"You know," he said, "I never even thought about it."

He sniffed and brushed his nose with the back of his hand. His eyes lifted to study the young man, who was frowning. The older man saw him as a boy, not quite a man yet despite the lines around his eyes.

"You look like a young fella somewhat familiar with the ladies," he said.

That perked the younger man right up.

"Well, in my younger days, I was sort of that way, too. A lady gave me that ring, see, back when I didn't have a pocket to pee in. Ring had been in her family for some time. Maybe the richest, oldest family in Colorado. Beautiful, God, that woman was beautiful. Her skin . . . she was fragile as a baby bird . . ."

"You were in love with her?" the younger man asked, embarrassed to be asking.

"Should of been. It was her husband I met first, see, in a bar. It was his idea. He introduced the two of us. His idea."

The young man whistled softly. "So he knew what was going on? Wow, kinky. What did he do—he just like to watch?"

Phlegm rattled in the old man's throat, and he spat it out. "Part of owning her, I reckon. I broke the thing on the rat skunk bastard's head. Haven't worn it since."

The younger man let air out in a short laugh and looked at the ring, turning it in front of his eyes with both hands.

"How much you take for it?"

The old man sipped his lukewarm tea. "A hundred dollar bill."

"A hundred dollars?"

"Naw, you're right, better not sell it. Ought to take it to a jewelry store in the city, wouldn't need to be having a damn yard sale. Here, let me have—"

"No, no, wait just a minute. You mean just this little broken piece here is worth a hundred dollars?"

The old man smiled. "More, if some bird's willing to pay for it."

"And she gave it to you? Jeez, what all did you do to that woman, huh?"

"Doing the job right is part of staying busy, son, that's what they tell me."

The younger man was laughing. "I'll remember that."

"Try her on. Since you laugh at my jokes, I'll let you have her for a hundred. If she fits."

The younger man slipped the ring over the middle finger of his right hand. It was snug. He used the adjacent fingers to turn it back and forth. "Doesn't look that bad the way it is," he said.

"Sure don't," the older man said.

The younger man reached for his hip pocket.

Maybe he had drowsed off, but the dog barked once and he was awake, aware of the dog's low growl and the new truck crunching to a stop, bulging with stylized power.

The driver was a man in early middle age. He was wearing a black cowboy hat with a white feather in the band, and he stepped out of the truck tall and lean and with a purpose. He tugged the hat down lower as he strode toward the shade, but under the brim his eyes darted to see what there was to see.

"Howdy," he said without slowing. "What you take for everything?"

The old man sat up and swallowed. The tea was gone and his throat was dry.

"Everything," he repeated like a tired parrot. His lips cracked when he smiled. "Now what do you want all this old junk for?"

The man walked straight to where the old man sat in the chair, and he stopped so close his leg almost touched the old man's hand. He stood still as a pole, staring down with dollar signs in his eyes.

"How much you take for the whole ball of wax?"

The old man hawked, but there was nothing to spit. "Any wax out here it's a puddle by now."

The tall man snorted. He thumbed the brim of his hat above the tan line and rocked on the heels of his slender boots.

"Name me a price, I ain't got time to haggle."

The old man felt his heart thump against his breastbone.

"Two thousand."

The man reached without moving his feet and picked up a yellow dish with a chip on the rim. "Two hundred's more likely."

"Thought you didn't want to haggle."

"Don't want to get robbed either."

"Then don't buy," the old man said. He wished the dog could make iced tea.

"Two fifty."

"That all it's worth to you?"

"Probably ain't worth that much."

"Then I guess it's not for sale."

"Two seventy-five."

"Appreciate you stopping by."

The tall man tucked the plate under his arm and took out his bill-fold. He pulled out hundred dollar bills one at a time, three of them. He held them out between two fingers.

"For that plate?"

The man realized the plate was under his arm. It clattered on the table. "Look, I'm doing you a favor—"

"No, you ain't. You're a greedy damn skunk. The world's full of greedy skunks. Now take your money and get out of here before I sic my dog on you."

The dog wagged his tail.

The man closed his mouth by yanking down the brim of his hat. He strode toward his truck, tucking the bills into his shirt pocket. After he opened the door, he turned back.

"You'll regret this tomorrow."

"Doubtful," the old man said, his heart bouncing hollow as a ping-pong ball.

When the pickup finished churning the gravel, the old man looked at the dog panting softly in the shade.

"Wagging your tail."

The old man smiled. He leaned his head back against the metal frame and closed his eyes.

"Where were you and that skillet when I needed you, darling?"

The dog moved the loose end of his tongue over to the other side of his mouth and didn't say anything.

"Finished me off," the old man said, surprised.

"Think he'll regret it tomorrow?" he said, or he thought, he wasn't sure which.

"Doubtful," he heard the dog pant, or someone, somewhere.

He let the smile go because he didn't have much choice. Rising, dancing, escaping the heat of the Oklahoma air, he faded with the smile into the inevitable.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

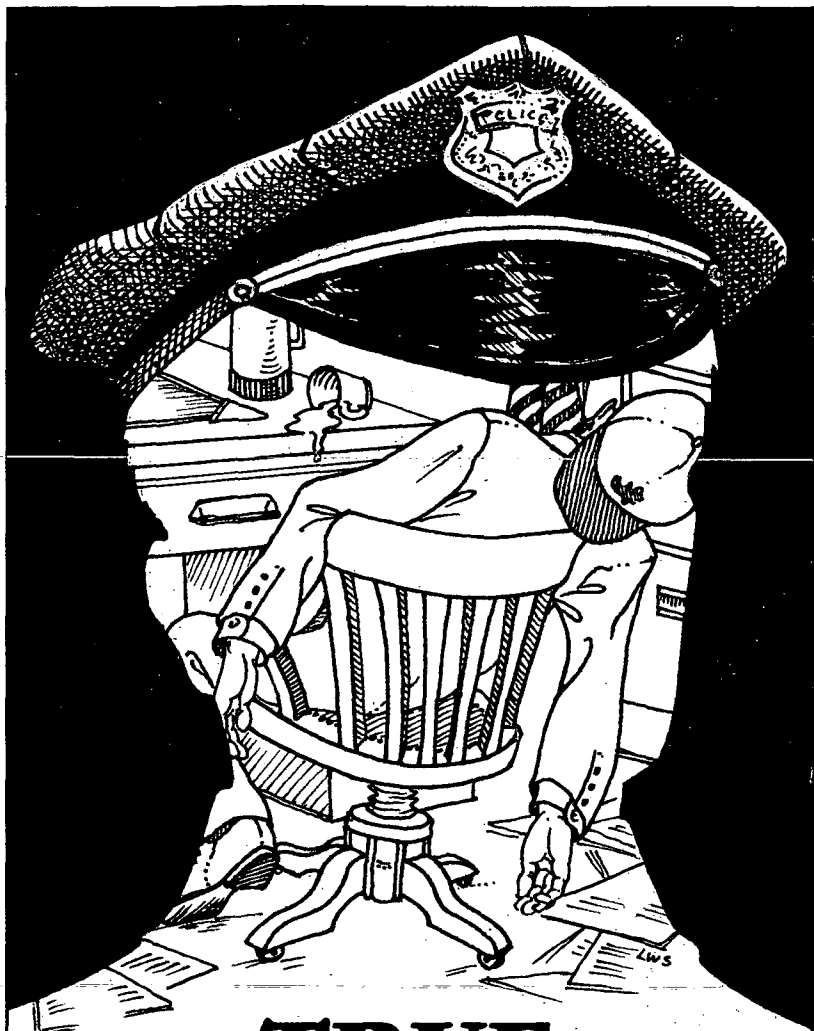


Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

Chairs for ghosts, of course. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "September Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the March Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

FICTION



TRUE SUSPECTS

B. K. STEVENS

Illustration by Linda Weatherly

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 9/98

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Dear Mother,

You've got no call to be mad at Bolt. It wasn't his fault I was on my own through most of the Salem Elementary case, and it sure wasn't his fault I nearly got myself killed. I mean, it wasn't like I *wanted* him to go off on a wild goose chase while I questioned the suspects alone and made such a mess, but as usual I said some dumb things, and as usual Bolt misinterpreted them, and then as usual I was too embarrassed to admit—well, I'll start at the beginning. Get ready for another long letter.

It all started one morning when the captain told Bolt and me to check out a complaint from an elementary school principal. (Not Kevin's principal, I'm happy to say—believe me, ten minutes into this case, I was gladder than ever that Kevin goes to Dickens Elementary and that his principal's such a sweet, sensible guy.) No, this call came from Salem Elementary—the principal had received a death threat, he said. Well, that sounded serious, so we went over first thing.

We had some trouble getting into the parking lot. An enormous gym teacher with a walkie-talkie guarded the entrance, and she thought our badges looked fake. So she called the station on her cell phone and wouldn't budge until the captain confirmed our I.D. numbers and gave her physical descriptions. We passed through the custodian's metal detector, calmed down the secretary's Doberman, final-

ly made it to Mr. Creakle's office. He was standing in his doorway arguing with a broad-shouldered, plaid-shirted, bluejeaned man with longish, sandy hair.

"I won't hear another word," the principal was saying. He was short and reedy, with deep-set eyes, a tiny nose, a too-large chin, and a suit cut so precisely and ironed so crisp it made my eyes ache. "I will not tolerate gang colors at Salem. Davie is banned from tonight's science fair, his exhibit is confiscated, and he is suspended from school indefinitely."

"You can't do that," the big man said angrily. "Damn it, Davie has a real chance of passing fourth grade this time if you just let him put the days in. And he's been so excited about this fair. He's not in a gang. He just loves rocks—he loves everything about nature, he spends hours in the field by our house—and he wanted colorful labels for them. He figured red made sense for igneous, blue for sedimentary, and green—"

"Red, blue, and green." Mr. Creakle nodded in satisfaction. "Gang colors, every one. Obviously Davie is deeply involved in gangs. If you were a responsible parent, you'd know that, and you'd have gotten him the help he so desperately needs. Now, if you'll excuse me, I believe these are the policemen I summoned to investigate the escalating criminal activity at Salem. Go home, Mr. Fields. Go home, and pray Davie had no part in this latest

crisis. Pray suspension is the worst penalty awaiting him."

I might not be the brightest guy on earth—and you know, Mother, I'm really not—but even I could tell this principal was bad news. Bolt half arched an eyebrow at me in that subtle way of his, and I could see he agreed. When we followed Mr. Creakle into his office, I spotted the confiscated science fair exhibit—dozens of pebbles and medium-sized rocks Super-Glued to a pegboard display stand, four larger rocks arranged in front of it, neatly lettered red, blue, and green labels on all of them. Mr. Creakle glanced at the exhibit and snorted in disgust.

He sat down at his desk, opened the top drawer, pulled out a nasal atomizer-type thing, and took four deep snorts. When he noticed us staring, he jabbed an angry finger toward the ceiling. "It's the ventilation system—ancient, full of dust and hair and gunk. I've complained to the school board again and again, but they do nothing. They don't care how I suffer—sometimes I think they're intentionally trying to poison me. At least the police are showing *some* interest in our troubles. You're a lieutenant?"

"That's right," I confirmed. "Lieutenant Walt Johnson. And this is Sergeant Gordon Bolt. So, you got a death threat?"

"Yes." He walked over to a file cabinet and unlocked it, then carefully reached into the top drawer and pulled out a limp

sheet of off-white, blue-lined paper. "I found it shoved under my office door this morning. What do you think of *this*?"

Bolt and I stared. It was a sheet torn raggedly from one of those handwriting practice pads—the kind Ellen and I've spent a fortune on these past years, since Kevin never *has* gotten the hang of cursive, just like I never did, and I *am* still working on my loops and swirls, Mother, I truly am. Anyhow, the person who'd scrawled on this sheet hadn't focused on loops and swirls. He or she had used a red crayon to draw a stick figure hanging from a scraggly tree, a big red noose around its neck. And there were big red block letters—"MR. CREAKLE IS A BOOGER-HEAD."

"You see?" Mr. Creakle said. "A death threat. Now, you'll want a list of suspects. There are an infinite number—so many people, from the mayor to the kindergartners, resent my efforts. But I've narrowed the list of top suspects to four."

"Just a minute," I said. "Mr. Creakle, I can see this note's no fun to receive, and I'm sorry it upset you. But I'd guess elementary principals get notes like this all the time. It's not necessarily a serious death threat. It might just be you canceled recess one day and got some kid steamed and—"

"The note *looks* like the work of a child," he cut in. "But it *could* be an adult disguising his or her handwriting and manner of ex-

pression to throw us off. There is, in fact, only one student at Salem so incorrigible, so amoral, that he warrants a place on my list of top suspects—Davie Fields, a fourth-grader.”

“A fourth-grader?” I shook my head, amused. “So, what is he—nine, ten years old? Mr. Creakle, you can’t really think—”

“He is fourteen,” Creakle said, looking smug. “He has been held back many times because he’s been suspended so often, for such a wide variety of offenses. Gang involvement, sexual harassment, carrying concealed weapons—take your pick.”

Gosh. Fourteen, and still in fourth grade. And he’d done all that stuff. Maybe this Davie Fields *was* a real threat, someone capable of stringing up a principal. I looked at Bolt, and he half arched that eyebrow again. I didn’t know what he meant by it. “You got records on this guy?” I asked.

“Of course.” He went back to the top file drawer—marked EVIDENCE—and pulled out a thick folder. “See for yourself.”

I looked. Bolt looked. After a while, we looked at each other, and this time *my* eyebrow half arched. “Mr. Creakle,” I said, “this kid doesn’t seem so bad. Kissing a girl when he was in kindergarten—that’s not sexual harassment; not in my book. Hell, I did that myself a dozen times, back in first grade when I was so crazy in love with Sadie Milcosky that I—well, never mind. And wearing a baseball cap backwards

doesn’t prove he’s in a gang, and having a spoon in his lunchbox isn’t really—”

“It was a *metal* spoon,” Mr. Creakle said, frowning. “The only spoon-necessitating item in his lunchbox was pudding—a plastic spoon would have sufficed. Obviously he packed that spoon because he planned to use it as a weapon. The five-week suspension was fully justified. Besides, he fits the profile of a troublemaker. I’ve read articles—I know. He’s overweight, he has freckles, he’s from a single-parent family—”

“His mother was a soldier killed during Desert Storm,” Bolt put in—and you know, Mother, how unusual it is for Bolt to speak up when I’m questioning someone. His face was hot and flushed as he continued. “His mother gave her life in the service of her country, and since her death it appears her widower has devoted himself wholeheartedly to the welfare of their only child. It’s hardly fair to stereotype this child and his father as—”

“His father,” Mr. Creakle cut in, “also makes my list of the top suspects. He’s the ringleader of a radical organization.”

Well, that got me suspicious all right. “What sort of radical organization?” I asked. “The Communist Party?”

“No,” Mr. Creakle said darkly. “The PTA. Cooper Fields is the president, and he’s constant trouble. He objected when I insisted on random drug testing of

the cookies at the bake sale, he objected when I decided students couldn't wear metal jewelry to school, he objected when I began spot bookbag searches—really, the man does nothing but object. And that reminds me.”

He turned down the volume on his hearing aid, then pushed a button on the wall next to his desk. An ear-pulverizing siren shrilled through the school. He turned his hearing aid back up.

“Time for a search,” he said. “We haven’t had one all day. I may ban bookbags soon. Students smuggle in so much contraband in them; weapons, comic books, gang paraphernalia, sugary snacks—”

The door to his office burst open, and a pettily plump, grey-haired woman walked in. “Mr. Creakle,” she began, then stopped when she saw us. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you had visitors. Are you gentlemen parents?”

“No,” Mr. Creakle said ominously. “Policemen.”

The woman’s face crinkled with delight. “How *nice*! I’m Miss Mell, the kindergarten teacher, and I *always* tell my boys and girls the police are our friends.” A look of concern came into her eyes, and she shook a gentle finger at us. “Now, I hope you boys are careful with those nasty guns you have to carry.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, standing up. (There’s something about short greyhaired teachers—they always make me feel like I should stand up before I speak.) “Very careful.”

She beamed. “What *nice* manners. Any time you’d like to give my boys and girls a talk on bicycle safety, you’re *quite* welcome. Now, you don’t mind, do you, if I interrupt your talk for one tiny little minute?” She turned and shook a finger at Mr. Creakle, this time not so gently. “Mr. Creakle, I don’t think it’s nice to sound that screechy siren so often. My class was having a *lovely* alphabet lesson—we’d nearly made it to j—and now we have to stop and search bookbags again. We waste too much time on this silliness; it makes it so hard to get work done. At this rate I’ll *never* get my boys and girls all the way to z.”

“Your inefficiency,” Mr. Creakle said coldly, “is not my concern. I am charged with preserving order at this school. I *will* preserve it. Your lack of support is unfortunate but hardly surprising. Considering your own history of drug-dealing—”

Miss Mell flushed hot pink. “Oh, you naughty boy!” she said. “To say such a mean, *mean* thing, right in front of these nice policemen! What *will* they think of me?” She turned to us hopelessly. “I gave an aspirin to a cafeteria lady—that’s *all* I did. The poor dear had a *terrible* headache, so I—”

“Zero tolerance for drugs,” Mr. Creakle cut in, “means zero tolerance for drugs. Your seniority protected you from being fully disciplined that time, but you needn’t expect such leniency in the future. If you continue to or-

ganize protests about my decision to ban coffee from the teachers' lounge, I'll—"

Her sweet little face contorted. "Oh, you old pooppy-brain!" she shouted, stamping her tiny foot. "You stinky lump of day-old doo-doo! Go staple your grungy nose shut, no-good piggy face!"

She stomped out. Bolt and I looked at each other. "Let me guess," I said. "She's on your Top Four list, too."

"She is." Mr. Creakle sat down again, opening a thermos and pouring himself a mug of orange juice. "She's the most openly insubordinate of my teachers—although, sadly, I can't trust any of them. Most complain about having classes interrupted, and *all* whine about my campaign to cure them of caffeine addiction. If it weren't for a few loyal supporters, I don't know what I'd do. Excuse me." He picked up a walkie-talkie. "Breaker! Breaker! This is Big Dog! Do you read me, Top Cat? Come in."

"Top Cat here," a deep voice came back. "I've got my ears on. Second-floor check complete. Boys' room secure. Over."

"Roger that, Top Cat," Mr. Creakle said. "Over and out." He switched off the walkie-talkie. "Our custodian. I wish my teachers were half as dedicated. As for my vice-principal, he's no help at all. In fact, he's the last of my top four suspects." He switched the walkie-talkie on. "Breaker! Breaker! Big Dog calling! Come in, Slimy Worm! Report to Central Op, pronto!"

This time the answering voice was weary and exasperated. "All right, Mr. Creakle. This is Mr. Tungay. I hear you, and I'll come to the office right away."

Mr. Creakle frowned as he flipped the switch again. "You see? He cares nothing for security—he won't even use the code. He's lazy, rebellious—and a Satanist."

A Satanist vice-principal! It made my skin crawl. I sure hope nobody at Kevin's school worships Satan, I thought, and then I caught myself. "How do you know he's a Satanist, Mr. Creakle?"

He leaned forward confidentially. "He has a tattoo on his left arm, and he constantly yawns and stretches—he must stay up late, to attend midnight masses. And once I caught him burning a scented candle in his office. I brought charges—there was a school board hearing. But they wouldn't dismiss him. Cowards!"

There was a knock on the door, and a slight, middle-aged man walked in followed by a red-eyed, marginally pudgy, faintly freckled teenager. "Mr. Creakle," the man said, "I've been speaking to Davie and his father. Mr. Fields is talking about complaining to the school board again. If you'd reconsider—"

"I never reconsider," Mr. Creakle said. "Reconsidering is the mark of moral cowards—not that I'd expect *you* to understand that. Moral codes repel you, don't they?" He crooked a finger at the teenager. "Come here, Davie. Do you

know who these men are? They are policemen. Do you know what they will do if you keep being bad? They'll put you in jail for the rest of your life."

"Hey, Mr. Creakle," I started to protest, but Davie cut in.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Creakle," he said, sobbing. "I didn't know they were gang colors. I just wanted nice labels for my rocks. I'll make new labels, I promise. I really, really want to be in the science fair—I spent *months* finding those rocks and looking them up in books and stuff. And I don't mean to be bad all the time. But there are so *many* rules—I can't keep track."

"No excuses." Mr. Creakle's mouth twitched with distaste. "No one is more contemptible than a miscreant who hides behind excuses. There's another matter we must discuss." He held up the so-called death threat. "Are you responsible for this?"

Davie squinted at it. "What's a booger-head?" he asked.

Mr. Creakle threw the paper down in disgust. "As if you didn't know! As if you didn't write this note yourself!"

"I didn't!" Davie cried. "I never saw it before! Please don't suspend me again! Dad wants me to go to college, and—"

"Get out!" Mr. Creakle said furiously. "I suspended you half an hour ago—another minute on school property and I'll have these policemen arrest you for loitering. And you will *not* be in the science fair, and the idea that any college would admit a pa-

thetic loser like you—ludicrous! Get out of my school!"

That stopped the crying. Davie squared his shoulders and looked Mr. Creakle in the eye. "Booger-head," he said, and left.

"Well, you handled that one well," Mr. Tungay said dryly. "Now his father's sure to complain to the Board. More meetings, more forms to fill out—oh well. Another day devoted to the noble cause of educating America's youth." He yawned and stretched. "Did you actually say these men are police officers? You actually bothered the police about that ridiculous note?"

"I did," he said, taking another swig of orange juice. "Are you surprised I dared? Did you think I'd be intimidated by your spells and incantations? I wasn't. I told them I suspect you—yes, *you*, would-be lord of darkness—of writing the note. And I told them about the tattoo on your arm, and about the candle."

"Oh God." Mr. Tungay yawned and stretched again. "My foul secrets revealed. I'm shaking in my cloven-hoofed boots." He turned to Bolt and me. "The tattoo says 'Alpha-Sig Forever.' I belonged to a fraternity in college, and I got drunk one night. Well, actually, I got drunk on more than one night, but only once so very drunk as to find the concept of a tattoo charming. If you gentlemen belonged to fraternities, I suspect you too got drunk on occasion, perhaps so drunk as to feel the charm of tattoos."

I nodded but didn't say any-

thing. You know how drunk I got at that one frat party, Mother, and you know how embarrassed I am about that tattoo. I only wish it were on my arm.

"As for the candle," Mr. Tun-gay continued, "my office is next to the cafeteria. I check the menus daily, and I know they never actually serve cabbage. Every day, however, it smells like they're *cooking* cabbage. Hence, the scented candle." He smiled, gave a lazy little wave, and left. Mr. Creakle sat forward.

"So," he said, "in view of these threats to my personal safety, what additional security measures do you suggest? Dusting the death-threat note for fingerprints? Body searches of all students and staff? Phone taps and urine tests and—"

"Hold on, Mr. Creakle," I said. I didn't want to offend him—we've gotta maintain good relations with the schools—but geez. Get real. "Maybe you're overreacting a tad. Tell you what. I don't think we'd get clear prints from that note, so why don't you just lock it up in that drawer of yours. And Bolt and me can drop by the school every few days, see how things are—"

"Come tonight," he urged. "To the science fair. The PTA insists I give a welcoming speech and award ribbons at the end. I intend to make real use of the occasion by alerting parents—the few who care—to the dangers of gangs. Come at seven o'clock."

"We'll drop by at some point," I said. Bolt and I would be out late

anyhow, tying up loose ends on the Vic Vecchio murder, and checking out the science fair might give me ideas for Kevin's next project. You know what a disaster it was last year when I asked my buddies on the bomb squad to help him put a little something together. "This science fair will last a couple of hours, right? We'll drop by before nine. See you then."

What a paranoid, I thought as Bolt and I walked to our car. The people at Salem seem all right, but he sees them as monsters, gets all worked up over nothing. I jabbed a finger back toward the school.

"That guy," I said to Bolt, "is something else. Like they say, he's got nothing to fear but fear itself."

Bolt arched both eyebrows this time, as if really struck. "Very perceptive, sir," he said. "'Nothing to fear but'—yes, I see your point. Those who create fears from nothing sometimes also create such resentment that real grounds for fear emerge. Probably Mr. Creakle's so-called suspects never would have given him trouble if he'd treated them decently. But because he fears them, he's made them hate him, so now they may pose threats to him. He *should* be afraid of his own fears, sir, as you say."

It wasn't what I'd meant, but it sounded good. So I nodded.

"Perhaps we *should* come back promptly at seven," Bolt went on. "Mr. Creakle has given several people fresh reasons to despise

him today—one might strike back tonight.”

Come on, Bolt, I thought. Not real likely. “I wanna finish the Vecchio report first,” I said. “We’ll make it here before nine. That’ll be plenty of time.”

As it turned out, it wasn’t. We arrived at Salem Elementary around eight forty, got past the guards, and headed for the cafeteria. It was real lively—kids running around, parents snapping photos, exhibits set up on every table. Miss Mell and Mr. Tungay stood in a cluster with a few other teacher-types; Davie’s father, Cooper Fields, stood off by himself in a corner, looking sorta limp. Poor guy, I thought. As PTA president, he’s probably gotta be here, but it’s gotta be rough seeing all these kids having fun and thinking of his own kid sitting at home, excluded from everything, miserable and in trouble.

I sighed, then checked out the exhibits. Lots of model volcanoes, a tornado-in-a-bottle, lots of home-made radio sets and potato clocks, the occasional gerbil—nothing all that original, nothing that seemed right for Kevin. After a while I started to get bored and was glad when Miss Mell and Mr. Tungay came over.

“Aren’t they all lovely?” she said, pointing proudly to the exhibits. “It was so hard to decide who should get ribbons.”

I glanced at my watch. Ten past nine. “Yeah, I bet,” I said. “Say, isn’t it time to announce

the winners? Where’s Mr. Creakle?”

Mr. Tungay yawned and stretched. “In his office, no doubt, completing his latest discourse on gangs. He was here to greet the parents at seven, stayed five minutes, and made his escape.”

“I *wish* he’d show more interest in our educational events,” Miss Mell said, frowning a tiny, furious frown. “And I *don’t* think this is a nice time for a gloomy old talk about gangs. Such a *happy* night—why spoil it?”

“Good point,” I said, glancing at my watch again. “Look, maybe he’s dozed off in his office. Why don’t I go check?”

“Oh, goodness,” Miss Mell objected. “You’re our *guest*. We can’t have you running errands. *I’ll* go.”

“You can’t,” Mr. Tungay said. “Neither can I. Chaperons aren’t allowed to leave the cafeteria. Send a student.”

She frowned again, then beckoned to a chubby seven-year-old. “Tommy, will you do us a *big* favor? Please go to Mr. Creakle’s office and say it’s time to give out ribbons. If he’s sleeping, don’t wake him—he might get miffed. Just come tell us.”

Tommy waddled off happily, proud of his mission, and we killed time by admiring an especially lively volcano model. Bolt was just showing me how the lava worked when Tommy ran back in.

His face was so red and hot I was afraid *he* might erupt. “He’s dead!” Tommy screamed. “His

face is all gross, and there's a big mess, and he looks real dead!"

Tommy's mother ran to comfort him, and Bolt and I stared at each other for a second before taking off down the hall, a whole crowd right behind us. A heart attack, I thought—that'd make his face look gross. But I'm sure he's not dead. After all, Tommy's a kid. What does he know?

Apparently he knew a corpse when he saw one. Mr. Creakle was dead, all right, and it wasn't from any heart attack. He was slumped back in his chair, arms limp at his sides, mouth gaping down, eyes staring up. Even from the door I saw the bicycle chain wrapped around his neck and the gash on his forehead, the overturned thermos and spilled juice on his desk. And there was a red baseball cap pulled on his head backwards, and papers scattered everywhere. The drawer marked EVIDENCE was open.

I turned to Bolt. "Get these people back, but nobody leaves the building yet. I'll call for a lab team."

I picked up a paper from the floor. It was a photocopied sheet telling parents how to tell whether their kids belonged to gangs—probably Mr. Creakle had planned to hand them out during his talk. One of the surest signs of gang membership, according to this sheet, was wearing a baseball cap backwards.

I looked at the corpse again, looked at that backwards red cap. Not so paranoid after all, I thought. Creakle was right—there

are gangs at Salem Elementary. And now they've killed him, and they've made damn sure we know they did it.

I skimmed through the sheet he'd written up, all about how evil and rotten gangs are. Creakle had really planned to lay it on the line to those parents. That's why the gangs killed him.

But wait—maybe they hadn't *quite* killed him. It suddenly occurred to me that I hadn't even checked his pulse.

I grabbed his left wrist and pressed down, and that put an end to hope. Not a flutter. Dead as could be. Murdered, just because he'd been about to tell the truth about gangs.

I was still clutching his wrist when Bolt came back into the office. I nodded toward the photocopied sheet in my hand, eager to have Bolt know just how outspoken and courageous Creakle had been. "Look," I said. "This has some bite to it." But Bolt looked at Creakle's hand, not at the paper. He squinted at the ring finger.

"You're right, sir," he said. "That's some bite. My knowledge has faded—I've been so occupied with those volumes of Victorian poetry your mother gave me that I've sadly neglected my field manuals of late—but judging from the degree of swelling and the configuration of marks, I'd say it's a massasauga bite. Not always deadly, but dangerous."

A massasauga? I stared at the finger and noticed the marks for the first time. So the gang had

tortured Creakle with a snake before strangling him. Poor man—he'd warned me about how bad things were at Salem, but I'd shrugged him off, hadn't given him the protection he needed. I could get in trouble for this. The captain might—but no. If I let myself get all scared, I'd make things worse. This was no time to lose my head. I looked up at Bolt weakly. "No time to push the panic button," I said.

"Good point, sir," Bolt said, nodding. "There it is, right next to his desk—the button he pushed this morning to set off the siren for the bookbag search. It would serve admirably as a panic button. Yet he had no time to push it. Why?"

That set me back a few paces. Bolt was right. If gang members had threatened Creakle with a snake, he'd have punched the panic button and set off the siren. But he'd never pushed the button, so obviously it hadn't happened that way. I'd figured everything wrong. I was the biggest idiot who'd ever lived. I smacked my hand against my forehead. "Dope!" I said.

"You're right, sir!" Bolt cried. "Dope! That's it exactly! And I'd wager it's in the orange juice!"

Delicately he dipped a finger into the spilled juice on the desk, licked, and nodded. "There is an undertaste. Not a lethal dosage, perhaps, but enough to render him relatively helpless."

All right. This was making sense again. The gang members drugged Mr. Creakle's juice—

probably everyone at Salem knew he carried his own thermos. So they got him dopey, they came back and started the snake torture, and then—well, they did something else. There was evidence they did something else—I'd noticed it when I came in the room—but now I couldn't remember what I'd noticed.

I rubbed my forehead. "I'm missing something," I said.

Bolt looked around the room, drew his head back, nodded curtly. "You're right, sir. I'm missing it, too—it's gone."

Well, at least I wasn't the only one who got confused. I thought hard, then remembered. Of course. The gang hit him—the gash on his forehead proved that. I leaned over for a closer look. I won't describe the gash, Mother; it'd make you sick. I shuddered and looked away. "That's a real turnoff," I said.

Bolt leaned in for a closer look, too. "Indeed, sir. The volume on his hearing aid isn't merely turned down—it's all the way off. A *real* turnoff, as you say. Acute observation, sir."

Well, I hadn't really observed anything about the hearing aid, but if my dumb remark had led Bolt to observe something, fine. I should've told him the truth right then, Mother—I should've told him long ago. I'm not a great detective like the captain and the newspapers and even Bolt himself think. I just blunder through case after case, saying stupid things. If Bolt weren't around to misinterpret them and turn

them into brilliant deductions, I'd still be walking a beat. But Bolt's never realized that, and neither has anyone else, and—well, walking a beat's no fun. It's the old dilemma, Mother. I know it's wrong to take credit when Bolt's the one who really solves our cases, but I've never had the nerve to do anything about it.

Anyhow, what was the big deal about a turned-off hearing aid? Creakle was working on his speech, the noise from the science fair distracted him, so he turned off his hearing aid. That helped explain why the gang members could sneak up on him, but we'd still have to spend days, maybe months questioning every gang in the city, trying to figure out which one did it.

And when we did figure it out, we wouldn't get much praise. That's how it is for cops. You work real hard, but no one really appreciates it. You don't get a parade. You don't get blaring trumpets, or pounding drums. No cop expects that. I looked over at Bolt and smiled. "No cop," I said, "expects clashing cymbals, not on any case."

"Indeed, sir," he said, nodding sagely. "We *don't* expect clashing symbols. But that's what we've found in this case."

Good old optimistic Bolt, I thought. Over thirty years on the force and he still thinks he'll find a way to get that parade—he's still waiting for clashing cymbals. Well, far be it from me to destroy his hopes. I gave him an encouraging wink.

The lab team arrived then, the coroner in tow. It didn't take her long to confirm that Creakle had been strangled to death by the bicycle chain about an hour ago, after being bitten by a massasauga and smashed in the head with a heavy, jagged object. She tasted the orange juice, agreed it was drugged, and sent the thermos to the lab to be tested.

Things were coming together quickly—in a way, too quickly. All these discoveries piling up one on top of another were making me dizzy. And the lab people rushing around taking pictures and dusting stuff and the noise from the cafeteria—kids shouting, parents complaining, teachers yelling for quiet. It gave me a headache, and I couldn't think straight. Frustrated, I pounded my fist on Creakle's desk.

"Order!" I cried. "We need order!"

Bolt patted my shoulder. "Yes, sir—that *is* crucial. But it's early days yet. We'll figure the order out soon."

That didn't make sense—or did it? Whenever Bolt says something that seems off the wall, it turns out to be the key to the whole case. It always makes me nervous.

I didn't have much time to worry about it just then. A pudgy, balding man pushed his way into the office.

"Where's Lieutenant Johnson?" he demanded and strode toward me when I raised my hand. "I'm the superintendent of schools. Mr. Tungay says Mr. Creakle

was murdered by a gang. Is that true?"

"Yes, sir," I said. I'd always thought that once I made lieutenant, pudgy little bald men wouldn't be able to intimidate me any more. But they still can. "We're just starting to—"

"Well, I *hope* you're starting to interrogate all the gang members in the city," he said. "Is that your plan?"

My plan. Geez. I hadn't had time to come up with a plan. "Well," I stalled, "you bet we'll interrogate gang members—that's a real good idea. But we've got loose ends to tie up here. So maybe I'll send someone to start on the gangs—"

"I'll take charge of that, lieutenant," Bolt chimed in. He shook the superintendent's hand. "I'm Sergeant Bolt, a veteran officer with extensive experience with gangs—I coordinate the Juvenile Crime Prevention Carpentry and Needlepoint After-School Program, and it has acquainted me with the most nefarious youths in this community. I shall begin questioning them tonight, and leave the lieutenant here to deal with administrative matters."

"That sounds good," the superintendent said. He'd been a school administrator for decades—he was used to the idea that higher-ups fill out forms while underlings do the real work. "So I can tell the media you're focusing on investigating gangs?"

"Absolutely," Bolt said, turning to me with a wink.

The superintendent hurried off to speak to the reporters outside the school, and Bolt flashed me a beatific smile. "A brilliant strategy, sir," he said. "I'm honored to serve as your decoy. I'll make a show of investigating gangs—as though you really believe this was a gang killing!—while you investigate the true suspects. Your ploy should throw them off nicely."

Wait a minute. *Didn't* I really believe this was a gang killing? I'd sure as hell thought I did. And who the hell were these true suspects Bolt was talking about, and how was I throwing them off? My throat got tight, and my elbows started sweating. "I'm not so sure, Bolt," I said. "I need you to—"

"Oh, sir!" Bolt said modestly. "As though you ever need me for anything! And in *this* case—you identified the key elements so swiftly it made my head swim. The clashing symbols and the need to establish order. Another twenty-four hours of working on *those* matters, sir, and you'll have your murderer. Meanwhile, I'll busy myself by setting up a smokescreen, pretending you take this gang nonsense seriously. I hope that eases your task, sir."

And he was gone. I tell you, Mother, I've never felt so lost in my life. If Bolt were right about this case—and he's right about every case—every idea I'd just come up with was dead wrong. This murder had nothing to do with gangs. So I'd have to start

from scratch, and this time I wouldn't have Bolt around to keep me on track. I'd have to solve this one on my own.

I took a deep breath. Bolt had said he'd put up a smokescreen while I investigated "the true suspects." What had he meant exactly? Well, maybe the four suspects on Mr. Creakle's list. It was hard to imagine any of them pulling off a murder this vicious and elaborate—the drugs, the snake, the blow to the head, the bicycle chain—but maybe one was nastier and more devious than he or she looked. The list was a place to start.

Plus, Bolt said the key elements in the case were order and clashing cymbals. That didn't help me much, but I'd try to figure out what Bolt thought I'd meant when I'd mentioned them.

There was a knock, and I looked up to see Mr. Tungay and Cooper Fields standing in the doorway to the office. "We're sorry to disturb you, lieutenant," Mr. Tungay said, "but we're wondering if people can go home. It's past ten—parents are anxious to get their children to bed. We've taken down the names of everyone at the fair—couldn't you speak to people tomorrow?"

I thought it over. "Yeah, sure. Just make an announcement, ask anyone who saw anything to come see me. I'll want to talk to both you guys tomorrow morning, though."

Cooper Fields paled at that, but Mr. Tungay just nodded. "Of course," he said. "You should

know, lieutenant, that the superintendent just told me I'm acting principal. I'll help in any way I can." He turned to Cooper Fields. "As to Davie—well, it was a busy day, and I never filled out the forms on the suspension. So nothing's official yet. Why don't we just forget the whole thing? Davie's welcome to return to school tomorrow."

"Thank you," Cooper Fields said, pumping his hand. "This means the world to us, Mr. Tungay." He hesitated. "What about his science project? Davie's been real upset—it'd cheer him up to get it back. Can I take it home to him?"

I glanced back at Davie's confiscated project just a few feet from the body—pebbles and medium-sized rocks Super-Glued to the pegboard, three larger rocks in front, everything neatly labeled. Boy, had that kid done a good job. "I'd love to let you take it, Mr. Fields," I said. "But technically it is part of the murder scene, and the lab guys get steamed if I disturb things before they've finished. You can have it real soon."

He didn't look happy, but he said thanks anyway and left. I turned to Mr. Tungay. "I'm glad you're letting Davie come back," I said. "So you don't think there are gangs at Salem?"

He sighed. "No, I just don't think Davie's involved. Labels on a science project don't prove anything. But gangs—I admit I used to think Mr. Creakle exaggerated the danger. But his death has

proved him right. We *do* have gangs at Salem, and it will be my job to stop them. I owe it to Mr. Creakle.”

He was all somber, not like the easy-going, wisecracking guy we’d met that morning. Mr. Creakle’s death must have hit him hard. When I left an hour later, I saw him outside the school talking to a camera crew, making a statement about how he was going to carry on Mr. Creakle’s legacy, crack down on gangs hard.

As for me, I didn’t make any statement. The reporters charged the minute they spotted me, but no way was I going to open my mouth in public—even I am bright enough to know that’d be stupid. I had to figure out the business about order and clashing cymbals. And I had to do it without Bolt.

At three A.M. I panicked. I hadn’t figured out a thing. I needed Bolt. I called his home, got no answer, tried the station.

“He came in an hour ago, met with the captain,” the desk sergeant said. “Bolt’s gonna handle this gang investigation deep under cover. Not even the captain will know how to find him. The captain says the media’ll eat it up, think we’re going at this real vigorous. And Bolt said something about needing to give you a suitably thick smokescreen. What’s that mean, anyhow?”

It meant I was a dead man. No Bolt to help me on the case, not even any way to talk to him after hours, ramble on aimlessly and

hope he’d pick up on something. I’m gonna mess up for sure, I thought. I’m gonna mess up big.

I woke Ellen up, hoping for advice—because you know she’s smarter than I am, Mother, in some ways almost as smart as Bolt. But all she did was grumble and roll over and tell me I’d damn well better get some rest or I’d be no damn good for anything in the morning. Well, I never thought I’d fall asleep, but I did. And when I woke up, I could see the whole murder plain—not who’d done it, but how it happened. It must’ve come to me in a dream.

The key thing, I saw, was hatred. The murderer really hated Creakle, really wanted him to suffer. Well, all four top suspects hated Creakle plenty. But Creakle was real paranoid—the murderer had to catch him off-guard. So the first step was to sneak into Creakle’s office, drug the orange juice, wait.

Then the murderer had to come back to finish him off. Mr. Tungay, Miss Mell, and Cooper Fields could’ve managed that—at a science fair that big and noisy, anybody could slip away for a bit and not be missed. And Davie had probably been at home alone—he’s too old for a babysitter. He could’ve slipped away, too.

So the murderer had slipped away, all hot to torture Creakle. But Creakle had slugged down so much juice that he was out cold. How could he suffer if he was unconscious? The murderer

had to wake Creakle up. How did he—or she—do it?

A clash of cymbals, I thought triumphantly. Bolt *said* that was a key to this case. Obviously the murderer had been afraid Creakle would fall asleep and had brought some cymbals along just in case. Obviously this killer was a musician.

So the murderer clashed those cymbals. Creakle woke up with a jolt, his ears pounding—that's why he switched his hearing aid off. The murderer sicced the snake on Creakle, then smashed him in the head. Maybe Creakle was still semiconscious when the murderer stuck the baseball cap on him, scattered the papers, taunted him. Then he—or she—finished him off with the bicycle chain and ran away. One murder, complete in every detail.

Except I didn't know who the murderer was. But that'd come. All I had to remember was that I was looking for a percussionist.

And I had to keep order. That was the other point Bolt had stressed. He was going to all this trouble to throw up a smoke-screen—it was crucial that I keep things peaceful so the murderer wouldn't know he or she was a suspect until I had all my evidence and could make my arrest. Well, that should be easy.

I stopped at the station to pick up a voice-activated tape recorder—since I wouldn't have Bolt around to tell me what my dumb comments meant, I'd better have them on tape so I could listen to them again and again, maybe

figure out what they meant myself. The recorder tucked in my jacket pocket, I headed for Salem Elementary, got past the gym teacher and the metal detector and the Doberman. But I couldn't see Mr. Tungay right away. He was with a reporter, the secretary said. So I asked where Davie Fields' classroom was and strolled off toward the fourth grade.

It wasn't hard to spot Davie—he was a foot taller than any of his classmates. I caught the teacher's eye, flashed my badge, asked to speak with Davie, and waited in the hall. A few moments later he came out—dragging his feet, keeping his eyes on the floor. He doesn't want to talk to me, I thought. Maybe he's got something to hide. Well, I'll put him at his ease.

I tousled his hair. "Hey, there, Davie," I said. "I'm Lieutenant Johnson. I want to talk to you for a few minutes—no special reason, just want to get to know you. Hey, that's some cool science project! You really like rocks, huh?"

He wouldn't look at me. "Yeah," he said. "I like rocks."

"That's great." I smiled as hard as I could. "Rocks are neat. So, you're a nature lover. I heard your dad say you spend lots of time in the field near your house. Is that true?"

He took a deep, ragged breath. "I guess. But Mr. Creakle was strangled, right? All the kids say that's how he died."

"Let's not talk about Mr. Creakle," I said, trying to help him re-

lax. "I don't want you to get upset, thinking about murder and prison and all. So, you like music?"

He looked up at me quickly. "Some music," he said. "Just regular rock and some country, nice things like that. No gangsta rap or heavy metal if that's what you're thinking."

"I'm not thinking anything at all," I said lightly, and you know, Mother, it was just about true. "I'm just getting to know you. How about marching bands? You like those?"

He shook his head.

"No. They're boring."

"Oh, I can't agree with you there, Davie," I said, smiling away again. "I think they're lots of fun—all those trumpets and drums and stuff. Do you play any instruments?"

Now he looked scared. "No. We can't afford instruments—my dad doesn't make much money. And your questions make me feel weird, and—you're not some kid-freak, are you?"

I smiled harder. "No, no. I'm a policeman. I'm your friend. I just like you, Davie. Try to relax."

He gulped.

"I gotta go. I mean, we're doing multiplication facts, and I've never stayed in school long enough to get to the nines before, and my dad wants me to go to college, and you're so strange, and—can I please go back to class? Please?"

"You bet, Davie." I grinned as I tousled his hair again. He ran off. That went well, I thought.

I'm sure he never guessed he's a suspect, and I've established that he's not a musician—or claims he's not.

I found the kindergarten in time to hear Miss Mell clap her hands briskly and tell the kids to get ready for snack. Snack, I thought. My luck is changing. I can use a snack. I'd been so eager to get to work that I'd left without catching breakfast.

Miss Mell was glad to see me. "Boys and girls!" she cried. "This is Lieutenant Johnson. He's a *very* nice policeman—all policemen are nice, they're *all* our friends—and he's joining us for snack. Say hello to Lieutenant Johnson, boys and girls."

They chorused hello—sorta listlessly, I thought—and Miss Mell bustled, making sure every kid had a carton and a cookie. Then she brought a carton and a cookie to me. "*Here* you are, lieutenant," she said. "A lovely cookie, and some *lovely* milk."

I took the cookie but blanched at the milk. "To tell the truth, Miss Mell," I said, "I've got a little lactose intolerance problem. You got any juice? Orange juice maybe?"

She paled. "No juice. Are you *sure* you won't have milk?"

"Better not," I said cheerfully. "Some coffee would hit the spot, though—but Mr. Creakle wouldn't let you have coffee, right? Not even in the teachers' lounge?"

She turned paler. "No, but I brought some this morning, and brewed a *nice* fresh pot in the lounge—why don't you get some?"

"Oh, I'd rather chat with you," I said, smiling my best smile, putting her at ease. "So, you like coffee, huh?"

Now she flushed. "Yes. Is that so bad? All these boys and girls—such *dear* boys and girls, but there are so *many*, and they all need so *much* attention, all the time, and they simply *won't* shut up about it, and if a tiny little cup of coffee helps me cope, is that *wrong*? Is that so hard to *understand*? You'd have to be a *banana-brain* not to understand. You'd have to be a *mushy-guts* not to understand. You'd have to be a *booger-head*."

Booger-head. Now, that's what I call a clue. Miss Mell jumped to the top of my list of suspects—at least, my list of note-writer suspects. I smiled with all my might. "You bet, Miss Mell," I said. "Coffee can be real soothing. Just like music. You like music? You ever play an instrument?"

"Why, yes," she said, smiling right back, completely at ease now. "I *love* music, and I spent some of my happiest hours in my high school marching band. It was rather a radical thing for a girl to do—most girls back then played piano or violin. But if I say so myself, I've always had a *remarkable* sense of beat. My dear mother was shocked by my preference at first, but eventually even she admitted that I was *born* to be a percussionist."

A percussionist. Just what I'd been looking for. I chowed down my cookie. "Thanks, Miss Mell," I said. "Great snack. Of course, if

you'd had juice—but I won't keep harping on juice. Believe me, I *loved* this snack. Not another word about juice."

She looked a little edgy as I walked away. I felt great. She obviously hadn't suspected what I was really up to—and chances were, I had my murderer right there. But I was determined to be thorough. That's the way Bolt would want it.

So I went back to Mr. Tungay's office, and this time he was free. I waved my way past his secretary. "Hey, Mr. Tungay," I said. "How's it going? How's it feel to be principal?"

He jerked his head back. "I'm only the *acting* principal. The superintendent made that clear last night—you can ask him if you like. This is not a permanent promotion. I have not benefitted in any substantial way from Mr. Creakle's death."

"Nah, I didn't mean that," I said, putting him at ease, plunking myself in a chair. "I never had you pegged as the ambitious sort. You seem laid back; you had all day to fill out Davie's suspension form but never got around to it, you seem like the kinda guy who'd rather go slow and make jokes. Mr. Creakle, though. He was always stirring things up—even accusing you of being a Satanist, insisting on a hearing. But that's over with now. It's off. Now you're in charge. So. You like music?"

Mr. Tungay's eyes narrowed. "Classical music, yes."

"Yeah, that's cool," I said. "But

sometimes it seems a little tame, y'know? Sometimes, you want music with more of a beat—more drums, more trumpets. More cymbals. Right?"

Mr. Tungay sighed. "I've never found classical music lacking in that respect. And much as I'd love to discuss music with you, I have to go meet the superintendent. We're having lunch, and then we're meeting with representatives of the press to discuss our new anti-gang campaign. You'll excuse me?"

My music question hadn't gotten much of a rise out of him. Maybe he was playing it cool, pretending he didn't see my point. I know for a fact there *are* cymbals in classical music—I'd learned that from a Hitchcock film, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. I smiled. "One more question," I said. "Mr. Creakle was strangled with a bicycle chain. Any idea how the killer came by that?"

He gestured toward the file drawer marked EVIDENCE. "I'd guess it was in that drawer. Yesterday Mr. Creakle decided chain locks were potential weapons and personally sawed the locks off a dozen bicycles parked outside the school. Didn't the police get several complaints about stolen bicycles?"

Come to think of it, we did. So Creakle sawed off the locks and put them in his drawer—and then he'd probably unlocked the drawer to get visual aids for his talk on gangs; unintentionally supplying his killer with a weap-

on. Well, there was probably some sort of rough justice here, but damned if I could nail it down. "Thanks for your help," I said. "Have a good lunch, and a real good press conference. Mr. Creakle's gone—that dumb old hearing can't hurt you now. Like I said, it's in the past, over with, off. I bet you'll be the permanent principal soon."

He frowned. "Perhaps," he said.

Another successful interrogation. I'm doing a damn good job of keeping order, I thought. Like the others, Mr. Tungay had no idea he was a suspect. He'd acted a little nervous, sure—so had the others—but most people get nervous around cops. The main thing was, he hadn't seen through my questions.

As I was leaving the school, I met Cooper Fields coming in.

This lucky streak is holding up great, I thought as I shook his hand. "Hey, Mr. Fields," I said. "I was just gonna come looking for you. How come you're here? Is Davie in trouble again?"

"No, no," Cooper Fields said. "I'm sure he's doing fine. I just came to see if I could pick up his science project."

I shook my head. "Sorry, but the lab guys took it to the station. It was pretty close to Mr. Creakle's desk, so they wanna run tests, see if any blood got on it when he was hit. If you ask me, they're being silly. I mean, even if they do find blood traces, what'll that prove? That science project obviously had nothing to do with the murder. I know that. You

don't have to hit *me* over the head to make me see that."

There, I thought. *That* should put him at ease, make him believe I don't think there's any connection between the science project and the murder—though I knew damn well the fuss about the project gave both Cooper Fields and Davie damn good motives.

Strangely enough, he didn't look all that at ease. "Yeah, well, that's okay," he said, looking down at the floor, just like his son had. "Well, I'd better get back to work."

"Hey, no big hurry." I draped an arm around his shoulder, friendly-like. I didn't want him leaving before I'd asked him about music. "Let's talk about Davie. Mr. Creakle sure picked on him, didn't he? Poor Davie musta been all traumatized, like."

"Not the way you're thinking," he said, looking up anxiously. "I mean, he was hurt, sure, but it never made him angry or mean. You'd think it would—I kept waiting for it to happen. But no matter how bad Mr. Creakle treated him, Davie stayed sweet and trusting. He blamed himself for his troubles, not Mr. Creakle. In a lotta ways, he's still like a little boy, not a teenager—a *nice* little boy. You gotta believe that."

"I do," I said, choking up. Talk about a loving father—and a first-class motive for murder. To see an innocent son persecuted year after year by a creep like Creakle—it must have driven Cooper Fields nuts. It'd drive *me*

nuts if anybody tried that with Kevin. I could understand why he might've gone for the bicycle chain, and I was almost glad Bolt wasn't around. If this guy did do it, I thought, I almost hope we don't catch him.

"I understand, Mr. Fields," I said, groping for the right words to let him know how moved I was. "I've got a son, too, and the way you talk about Davie—well, it's *striking*, y'know? What I mean is, you really hit home with that one."

His eyes got wide. "What are you getting at?" he demanded.

Before I could explain, a screech ripped through the school. Not from a siren this time—from a person. Then there were a lot of high-pitched little shrieks. Cooper Fields and I looked at each other. "The kindergarten room," he said, and we took off.

We got there just as Mr. Tun-gay did, to find Miss Mell cowering in a corner, all her boys and girls huddled around her. She pointed a shaky finger. "Over there—in Make-Believe Land!"

I ran over to a castlelike playhouse with pillars made of foil-covered oatmeal boxes, guarded by a cheerful-looking orange posterboard dragon. There, slithering his way through a shallow, tissue-lined moat, was a snake. I don't know much about snakes—I don't like things that slither, so I've never taken an interest—but I was willing to bet this was a massasauga.

"Keep back," I ordered—sorta needlessly, since everybody was

keeping back already. "Mr. Tungay, call 911 and get Animal Control over here. Miss Mell, evacuate your class. I'll stand guard. If he tries to slither out of the moat, I'll shoot him."

Luckily the snake seemed to like the tissue paper and was still nestled in the moat when the Animal Control folks arrived. They scooped him up, confirmed he was a massasauga—from the size of him not a mature one—and took him to the animal shelter. Pretty dumb of the murderer, I thought, leaving a clue behind like that. But maybe he or she hadn't had much choice. Maybe snakes have minds of their own.

Anyway, I was glad I hadn't had to shoot. I don't know what the consequences would've been—an inquest with Internal Affairs, maybe, or maybe with the SPCA—but it would've been a nuisance.

I walked out into the hall. By now just about the whole school had gathered there. I waved triumphantly.

"Show's over, folks," I said. "Miss Mell, you can take your boys and girls back to class."

"But are you sure it's *safe*?" she said fearfully, hanging back. "What if there are *more* of them?"

"Nah, don't worry about that," I said, smiling confidently. "There is just one snake in *this* school—you can bet on it."

"But how would a snake like that get in the building?" Cooper Fields asked, his hands resting on Davie's shoulders.

This was awkward. Revealing what I knew about the snake would tip the murderer off for sure. Time to take advantage of Bolt's smokescreen, I figured. "Maybe some gang members planted it there," I said. "That sound reasonable to you, Mr. Tungay?"

I thought he'd jump on the suggestion, but he just shrugged. "It's possible," he said. "I'll look into it."

Then Davie started sobbing. Poor kid—he'd already lost his mother, and now his father had been in a room with a dangerous snake. He must've been terrified, thinking how close he'd come to being a hundred percent orphan. Lots of other kids looked close to tears, too. No wonder. Snakes are creepy things.

I held up both hands in a calming gesture. "Look, folks," I said, "you've been through a rough, scary time. But we cops know how to handle these things." I glanced at my watch. Yup, the van should've just about made it to the animal shelter. "Real soon we'll have the creep who scared you behind bars."

"Are you *positive*?" a third-grade teacher asked.

"Oh sure." There'd be some forms to fill out at the animal shelter, but pretty soon they'd decide whether to release the snake or put it to sleep. "I've gotta tie up some loose ends, but count on it—I'll write my final report on this business tonight, and the whole thing'll be over. By tomorrow morning everything

will be nice and peaceful at Salem Elementary."

I didn't see how I could've put it any clearer, but people still looked uneasy. Well, a snake sure can stir things up. Concerned, I took the time to say some reassuring words to various folks on my way out.

"No more interrupted classes," I told Miss Mell, thinking of how that darn snake had disturbed her kindergarten that morning. "That's what you want, isn't it? And now you've got it."

I turned to Mr. Tungay. "Enjoy your lunch and your press conference," I said, and remembered how important it was to keep up the smokescreen. I lowered my voice. "Tell those guys how dangerous gangs are. Mr. Creakle would've wanted it that way."

Then I tousled Davie's hair one last time and winked at his father. "I bet you both feel more secure now," I said, thinking of the scare the snake had given them. "Well, enjoy it."

There—comforting words all around. That's the best part of police work, Mother, when you can ease up on interrogating and just be nice. One of these guys was a killer, but even so, it's no fun being scared by a snake. I was glad to do what I could.

I drove to the animal shelter. After a bunch of consultations, the director decided to drive the snake to a marshy area and release it, and I was glad. That snake *had* given me a scare, but now that I'd spent some time seeing him all forlorn, curled up in a

little cage, he'd started to look cute.

So much for the snake. After a late lunch I stopped by the station to drop off my tapes and ask to have them transcribed. Then I remembered Tommy, the kid who'd found Mr. Creakle's body. I still hadn't questioned him and I probably should—not that a seven-year-old could tell me much but he *had* been first on the scene. I checked his address and drove out to his house.

Like I'd figured, he couldn't tell me much. He was still upset, his parents said—bad dreams all night, weepy in the morning. They had taken him from doctor to therapist to trauma counsellor, they'd filled prescriptions, and still he couldn't stop shaking. Reluctantly they gave me five minutes with him. I learned nothing. Mr. Creakle's face was gross, he told me. He'd looked real dead. And he wanted his mommy and daddy.

I opened his bedroom door, and his mommy and daddy and grandmothers and grandfathers rushed in bearing armloads of teddy bears. I walked out sighing. One more stop at the station, I judged. One more report. Then I'd just wait to hear from Bolt.

I'd parked across from Tommy's house—the driveway was clogged with relatives' cars and pharmacy delivery trucks. As I crossed the street—well, Mother, I'm not clear on this part, and you wouldn't enjoy hearing about it anyway. But that's when the car came barreling out of nowhere, and that's when I got hit.

The next thing I remember is coming to groggy consciousness in a hospital bed, with Ellen squeezing the hell out of my hand and some doctor droning on about no broken bones but bruises and concussions. I forced my eyelids up and saw the scariest thing I've ever seen in my life. It was Bolt, standing at the foot of my bed, faded jeans, no shirt, leather vest, earrings, nose rings, lip rings, and—well, I won't say where the other rings were. It'd take the romance out of your relationship with Bolt. And a baseball cap pulled on backwards. It was terrifying. I gasped, groaned, and forced myself back to unconsciousness.

Then I was awake again, but just barely, and sitting in a wheelchair. I managed to twist my head around and saw it was Bolt pushing the wheelchair. Thank God all the rings were gone and he was wearing a suit. The world started to seem real again.

"Don't worry, sir," he said, "you needn't do a thing. God knows, you've done enough—and God knows at what risk to your safety! I shouldn't have let you talk me into going undercover. I should have stayed with you, to protect you. But I've assembled the suspects as you must have planned to do—they've been read their rights and have agreed to see us without lawyers present. I'll present your conclusions to them. The tapes you so thoughtfully had transcribed have given me all the help I need to understand your unraveling of this

case—and I trust, sir, that I shall not disgrace you during this final confrontation."

I could barely think. Those damn doctors must've drugged me up something fierce. "Tommytommy," I said, thinking of the last thing that'd happened before I was hit. "Tommysad. Poortommy."

"Yes, sir," Bolt said. "I know how grateful you are to Tommy for supplying a crucial clue and how concerned you've been. You have mumbled about him often these last two days."

Two days? What the hell was he talking about, two days? Had I really been out of it for two whole days?

"Well," Bolt was saying, "worry no longer. His parents took him to see their minister, and she's done him far more good than doctors and therapists ever could. Well! Here we are!"

He wheeled me into a small waiting room, its pastel walls packed with framed plaques with cheerful quotations. I forced my eyes into focus and saw them perched awkwardly on comfy chairs—Miss Mell, Mr. Tungay, Cooper Fields, Davie. What was going on?

Bolt parked my wheelchair in the middle of the room and stood next to it, surveying the four suspects before he spoke. "I feel it's best to get the full truth out at once," he said, "with everyone present. The lieutenant deserves the satisfaction of confronting all of you, of hearing his deductions confirmed. True, I hardly need to

tell you his deductions. You must have guessed them from the hints he planted when he interrogated you, tempting you to betray your guilty knowledge. You all know what his suspicions are—and one of you became so desperate to silence him that you tried to kill him before he could make the speedy arrest he'd promised in front of the entire school."

Those doctors must have *really* drugged me up. This made no sense. I'd never drawn any deductions worth mentioning, never promised a speedy arrest, never said anything in front of the entire school. Except when I'd reassured folks about the snake, of course, and said soon he'd be locked up in the animal shelter, and—oh. I started to catch on. I looked up at Bolt with the groggy idea I ought to clear things up. But I couldn't get my mouth to work right. "Snakey, snakey," I said. "Slitherslither."

He patted my shoulder. "Indeed, sir. You cleverly, compassionately, used the snake to mask your warning to the murderer so the children wouldn't be alarmed. 'There's just one snake at *this* school'—that's how you put it. The innocent were reassured, but the guilty knew what you meant: the murderer's identity was no longer a secret to you. I can't approve of your tactic—putting yourself in harm's way to draw the murderer out. But I realize we might not have been able to prove our case otherwise. There wasn't enough evidence at the murder scene."

Miss Mell looked confused. "But I heard there was a *lot* of evidence in the office, and it all pointed to a gang killing."

"It was *supposed* to point to a gang killing," he corrected. "In fact it pointed in several different directions. There were several symbolic touches at the murder scene—clearly there was a desire to make a statement, to make the revenge complete. But each symbol pointed to a different culprit, and none fit with the gang symbols planted to throw us off—the backwards cap, the scattered papers. The lieutenant saw that instantly. In most cases all clues and symbols are consistent—that's what we expect to find. In this case, we found clashing symbols."

Clashing symbols. Not clashing cymbals. Boy, did I feel dumb. And if these symbols, whatever they were, pointed in different directions, that must mean—gosh. There was more than one murderer. Maybe all four of these guys had conspired to kill Mr. Creakle. Maybe, when Bolt accused them, they'd rush him, try to escape. It'd be chaos. We needed more cops to back us up, keep things peaceful and orderly. I looked up at Bolt again.

"Order," I said, edging closer to coherence. "Gotta have order."

He patted my shoulder again. "I'm coming to that. From the first the lieutenant stressed the need to determine the order of the attacks. Clearly, there *had* been several separate attacks. Only a fool could imagine that a

single person, or a group acting in concert, would settle upon a murder method involving drugs, a snake, a blow to the head, a bicycle chain—who would concoct such a scheme? The lieutenant immediately saw that several people attacked Mr. Creakle, each acting without any knowledge of the others' attempts. It was our job to distinguish between the preliminary, unsuccessful attacks and the final, fatal one."

So only a fool would come up with a theory about a single murderer or a conspiracy. I slumped lower in my wheelchair.

Bolt gave me credit for knowing that immediately, but this was the first time any of it had been clear to me. "Firstclear," I admitted in a mumble. "First clear, clear, clear."

"Yes, sir," Bolt agreed. "It *was* clear which attack was first, and it wasn't hard to identify the attacker. Clearly the first attack involved the orange juice—it must have been drugged before Mr. Creakle returned to his office. Almost as clearly the drugs were symbolic. This attacker resented, among other things, Mr. Creakle's harassment of people he falsely accused of dealing drugs and his ban on coffee. What more appropriate way to kill him than by drugging his alternative beverage and—"

"Oh, it's *true!*" Miss Mell said, beginning to sob. "I could see Lieutenant Johnson knew—the way he kept on and on about juice when he visited my class. I did it.

I'm not usually naughty, I'm truly *not*, but Mr. Creakle kept interrupting class with that silly old *siren*, and he wouldn't let us have coffee, and I got so *edgy*, and he was such a *booger-head*, so—"

"—so you wrote a threatening note?" Bolt cut in gently.

"I did," she admitted. "I didn't plan to kill him. But then he called me a *drug* dealer in front of you nice policemen. I was so embarrassed, and I *needed* coffee, and that nasty smelly-pants kept guzzling his damned *juice*, and I snapped, and—"

"Please, Miss Mell," Bolt said gently, "don't say any more until you have talked to a lawyer. We know what happened: you slipped away to his office while he was welcoming parents to the science fair, drugged the juice, went back to the fair. And you stayed there. The lieutenant does not suspect you of returning to finish Mr. Creakle off in that gruesome way. Had you done so, you'd never have allowed an emotionally delicate boy like Tommy to find the body. You love children far too much."

"I do," she said and sniffed, moved by Bolt's kind words.

"To proceed." Bolt turned to the other suspects. "For the second attack, too, the groundwork was laid before Mr. Creakle returned to his office. A massasauga was planted, perhaps in his desk drawer. I hypothesize that Mr. Creakle drank some drugged juice, felt odd, and reached for the nasal atomizer in his top drawer. That's

when the snake bit him. He felt the sting undoubtedly, but perhaps was so groggy from the drugs that he didn't realize what had happened. At any rate the snake slithered off, to reappear the next day in Miss Mell's class."

Wow. I couldn't believe the way Bolt had reconstructed this whole thing. I shook my head in admiration.

"Not bad," I said. "Notbad, notbad, notbad."

Bolt nodded sympathetically. "Indeed. This attacker is *not* bad, though he has often been called such." He walked over to Davie Fields. "Is there something you'd like to tell us, Davie?"

His father tried to stop him, but Davie was determined.

"You're right—I mean, the lieutenant is right. I could tell he knew when he kept talking about how much time I spend in the field near my home. That's where I found the snake. I'm sorry, Dad—I know I shouldn't leave the house when you're not home. But he wouldn't let me be in the science fair, and he said I'd never get into college, and you want that so much, and I got so *mad*. So after you left for the fair, I sneaked out and—"

"That's enough, Davie," his father cut in. "I'm real proud of you for telling the truth, but don't say any more. Not now." He looked up at Bolt with tears in his eyes. "It was just a kid's prank. I'm sure he just meant to scare Mr. Creakle, maybe give him a sore finger. I'm sure he didn't mean to kill him."

"And *I'm* sure the juvenile court judge will be open to such an argument," Bolt said. "No one who learns Davie's history will think justice would be served by an attempted homicide charge."

It was great the way Bolt was explaining everything so clearly. Usually, I get all confused when he explains a case, but this time I could follow him just fine. "Follow," I said, nodding and smiling. "Follow, follow."

Cooper Fields stood up. "You're right, lieutenant," he said. "Davie's setting me a fine example by telling the truth—I *should* follow it. I should confess, too." He turned to Bolt. "The lieutenant knows all this already—he kept making puns about things hitting home, things being striking. He's right—I hit Mr. Creakle. I never planned to—I just wanted to explain one more time about the science project, about how Davie hadn't meant to use gang colors for the labels. So I went up to his office around eight o'clock and started talking but he wouldn't pay attention—hardly looked at me, didn't say much beyond a few mumbles."

"And now we know why," Bolt said, nodding. "He'd been drugged and bitten by a snake."

"Yeah," Cooper Fields agreed, "but I thought he just didn't care. I was talking about how hard Davie'd worked on his exhibit, and I picked up one of the big rocks sitting on the floor in front of it—not as a weapon, just to make my point. I was pouring my heart out—and Creakle yawned

this big fat yawn, right in my face. I got so mad that I lost control, hit him in the head with the rock. And he, well, he passed clear out. It was awful. I thought I'd killed him, and I'd never meant to."

"I know that, Mr. Fields," Bolt said kindly, "and I'm sure the prosecutor will keep that in mind when she determines the charge. So then you panicked—"

"—and I ran," Cooper Fields said. "I took the rock—"

"We know," Bolt said, nodding. "The lieutenant commented that first night that he was missing something and I realized he meant one of the large rocks—there were four in the morning, only three after the murder. Did it have blood on it?"

"Yes," Cooper Fields confirmed. "And since it was from the exhibit, I figured the cops would suspect Davie and me, would see it was a symbol, like you said. I ran to the parking lot, threw it in a dumpster full of trash, and prayed you wouldn't find it. Then I went back to the science fair—and the whole time until Mr. Creakle's body was found I swear I kept praying he wasn't dead after all. And I swear I never ran down the lieutenant, and Davie didn't, either. We wouldn't do a thing like that."

"No," Bolt agreed. "You're decent people, pushed beyond the point of endurance by the injustices of a petty tyrant. That description also fits Miss Mell." He turned to Mr. Tungay. "It does not, however, fit you. We've heard

accounts of the first three attacks on Mr. Creakle. Tell us about the fourth."

Mr. Tungay yawned. "I know nothing about any attack. Obviously these three contributed to Mr. Creakle's death by putting him in a weakened condition. Then a gang member happened by and finished him off. Doesn't that theory fit the evidence?"

He was right. It did. Well, Bolt had done a great job of figuring out the first three attacks, but when you got right down to it, this *was* a gang killing. Anyhow, this confrontation thing was going on too long. I wanted to get back to bed. I tugged on Bolt's sleeve.

"Tired," I said. "Tired, tired."

"Yes, sir," he said. "Your surmise is correct. There *were* tracks left on the street after the hit-and-run attempt, and they *do* match Mr. Tungay's tires. We checked while his car was parked in the school lot. And there's a suspicious dent on the front fender, and the paint matches the paint on your overcoat. There's no doubt he ran you down, no doubt we can prove it. Proving he murdered Mr. Creakle may be more difficult, but—"

I was too exhausted to care about any of that. I just wanted to get to bed. Bolt should call an orderly or a nurse's aide to help me.

"Aide, aide, aide," I said.

"Of course I haven't forgotten the hearing aid." Bolt sounded a little offended. "As you pointed out that first night, the murder-

er had turned off Mr. Creakle's hearing aid—'a real turnoff' as you put it—and of course I recognized the symbolic significance of that act. Mr. Tungay endured a school board hearing when Mr. Creakle falsely accused him of being a Satanist, and lingering resentment about that hearing supplied the murder motive. Mr. Tungay might never have plotted a murder on his own; as you said during your interrogation, he's a 'laid-back' sort, more given to making jokes than to hatching schemes. But I can imagine how it happened. He went to Mr. Creakle's office on some errand—perhaps to say it was time to announce the awards—and found his nemesis unconscious, a helpless and irresistibly tempting target. He strangled him with a bicycle chain—"

"You can't prove it," Tungay cut in. "There's no evidence."

"There's *some* evidence," Bolt said calmly. "Your delight in being acting principal, your press conferences, your attempt to capitalize on the supposed gang activity at Salem—quite a turnaround for a man who just the day before scoffed at Mr. Creakle's fear of gangs, quite an indication that you planned to benefit fully from his death. That's a second motive."

Mr. Tungay shrugged. "It still isn't proof."

"Then there's the hearing aid switched off," Bolt continued. "That was your ironic commentary. By killing Mr. Creakle, you put an emphatic end to that

hearing about Satanism—the hearing was definitely off. As the lieutenant observed, you like making jokes, and this was your little joke on Mr. Creakle. You didn't like it, did you, when the lieutenant kept referring to the hearing, kept remarking that now it was in the past, over with, off. You knew he was onto you, so you ran him down to keep him from making the speedy arrest he'd promised the school. Even if we *can't* prove you murdered Mr. Creakle, the charge of attempting to murder a police officer will send you to prison for a long—"

I can't say exactly what happened next—to tell the truth, I'd sorta dozed off, I heard about it from a nurse later—but I remember hearing a roar and seeing Bolt go down. Mr. Tungay had tackled him. It's funny—a laid-back guy like that, attacking an officer in front of four witnesses. He had to know he couldn't get away, he'd just get in more trouble. But I guess he'd been pushed so far he didn't care. That must've been what happened when he killed Mr. Creakle—guys like Creakle are experts at pushing too far—and it happened again when I pushed him too far without knowing it and he ran me down. It happened again when he tackled Bolt. I guess once Creakle pushed Tungay over the edge, it didn't take all that much to push him over again.

Anyhow, Bolt didn't stay down long. He could've handled Tungay just fine—Bolt's a tough old

bird, Mother, not that I need to tell *you* that—but before he hit the floor, Miss Mell and Cooper Fields and Davie all hurled themselves at Tungay, yelling and punching and pinching. In thirty seconds they'd peeled him off Bolt; in another thirty seconds Bolt was on his feet and Tungay was handcuffed and on his way to jail.

There's not much more to tell. Mr. Tungay goes on trial soon, charged with murdering Mr. Creakle and attempting to murder me. The second charge is bound to stick, and the first might, too—the evidence is circumstantial, but I bet the jury buys it. Cooper Fields plea-bargained his charge down to assault and battery and got a suspended sentence. Davie got sent to reform school for six months, and I hear he's doing great. It's the longest stretch of time he's ever been in school without getting suspended, and he's zoomed up three grade levels.

The prosecutor wouldn't take anything less than an attempted murder charge for Miss Mell, but she's pleading temporary insanity caused by caffeine deprivation, and I think she's got a shot at acquittal. Plus her lawyer's filed a suit against some coffee manufacturers, charging them with purposely loading their product with addictive substances even though they knew consumers might go nuts if they couldn't get a fix. I hear the coffee guys offered to settle out of court for an amount in the high

six figures. By the time her legal troubles are over, Miss Mell should be a very rich woman.

Anyhow, you shouldn't be mad at Bolt. It was my fault we were split up on this case—and anyway, what does it matter? I'm out of the hospital, no permanent harm done, with another medal and two months' recovery leave at full pay, with Ellen and Kevin pampering me like crazy and Bolt dropping over every day to bring me his homemade chicken soup and those little jam pastry things even you can't bake as good as he does.

At this point, I've got just two worries. One is that I'll put on a ton from all this lying around the house and all those jam pastries—I try to resist them, but they're too damn tasty. The other worry is that you won't forgive Bolt in time to take him on that trip down the Amazon when you do your next *National Geographic* feature. He's been looking forward to that trip a lot—he probably won't admit that to you, since you two are sort of on the outs because of me—but he's been stocking up on insect repellent and practicing his Portuguese. What do you say, Mother? It wasn't his fault, he's a real nice guy, and I still say someday he'd make one hell of a stepfather for

Your loving son,
Walt

Dear Walt,

Don't worry. As you must know by now, Sergeant Bolt surprised me by showing up at my door

last night. Such madness—flying to Casablanca when he had only a three-day weekend, when most of his time was eaten up by travel—but it's just the sort of wild, extravagant gesture that makes him so dear.

I'd read your letter, so I understood the situation completely. His apologies were sweet but superfluous. We had a lovely if brief visit, and our plans for the Amazon are firm.

It pains me now to think I suspected him of shying away from a dangerous case and leaving you to handle it alone. It doesn't do to think the worst of people. That's the mistake Mr. Creakle made—imagining himself sur-

rounded by gangs and Satanists and drug dealers and every other sort of monster.

But I suppose some people find disciplining more enjoyable than educating, find the illusion of battling evildoers more exciting than the slow and unglamorous reality of teaching children to read and write. I'm sorry to see such a person end up as a principal.

I'm glad Kevin's principal isn't that way, I'm glad you're feeling better, and I'm sorry I made Mr. Creakle's mistake. Believe me, it's a mistake that will not soon be made again by

Your loving
Mother

SOLUTION TO THE JULY/AUGUST "UNSOLVED":

The bank robber was Tom Timmons, the younger brother of Charley Timmons, owner of the hardware store. He escaped detection because he was the conductor on the Dubuque & Webberville Railroad. (Remember, one week later the train had a *new* conductor.)

BUSINESSMAN	WIFE	STREET	BUSINESS
Abe Xander	Ellen	Kansas	grocer
Bert Ulman	Alice	Missouri	barber
Charley Timmons	Doris	Arkansas	hardware
Dan Vanburen	Becky	Tennessee	clothing
Elmer Smith	Flora	Louisiana	hotel
Frank Warfel	Cindy	Illinois	blacksmith

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the October issue.

"Sae, y've bin doon in t' mines agin," observed old Mary McNally as her grandson appeared in the doorway begrimed with coal dust.

"Aye, Gran," admitted the tall, fairhaired young man, shucking off his heavy jacket. "Ye know I'd ne'er ask my men ta gae where I would-na dare."

"Brave as was y'r father before ye! I expected as much, sae t' water's heatin' on t' stove. Git yoursel' cleaned oop whilst I tend to t' haggis." She disappeared into the kitchen of their modest home.

That winter of 1762 had been bitter, and times were made even harsher by the English, who had defeated the Scots at Culloden sixteen years before. Even here in Pitlochry, where the coal mines of the McNally family gave employment to those men still surviving and ablebodied, life was uncertain at best.

Haggis again. Andrew suspected his grandmother didn't relish it all that much. But haggis represented something of Scotland's glorious past—the victories of William Wallace and Robert the Bruce at Bannockburn in 1314, and even those of James IV before he was killed at Flodden Field in 1513. Haggis had supported the soldiers on their long marches against the invaders from the south, and old Mary would not let her grandson forget it. Clad in fresh clothes, he sat down at the table opposite his grandmother, the only relative he really knew. He folded his hands and waited for her prayer, which as always ended with "God preserve Scotland! Amen."

She stabbed the haggis with a long-bladed knife, and the aroma wafted outward. "'Tis a sad day, Andrew, that we hae coom tae this," Mary said sadly. "T' day will dawn when we McNallys and all other leal Scots will agin wear kilts, play bagpipes, and rule our-sel's. But here it be, y'r eighteenth birthday, and I hae naught proper to gi'e ye—except, mayhap, t' crown o' Robert t' Bruce."

He glanced up, thinking she was joking, but the old woman's face denied it. "Ye are serious?" he asked.

"Aye. I promised y'r father, God rest his soul. It happened when ye were a wee bairn, so ye hae no recollection. He were leal tae Bonnie Prince Charlie and joined him nighby. The prince gie y'r da t' crown and said, 'Guard it well, my trustworthy friend. The enemy is close at hand; I must away tae lead my faithful Highlanders.'" She went on

to tell of McNally's hiding out from the dreaded English in homes of trusted friends, one after another, always a step ahead of the enemy infantry and dragoons. He traveled south to Falkirk, then north to Brechin, and in succession to Aberdeen, Elgin, Cromarty, Dornoch, and to Gairloch, where he was badly wounded by a bullet from an English musket. He made his way home to Pitlochry, crossing Loch Ness and the Highlands.

"Aye, badly bleedin' he were, my poor son. But he gasped out his tale o' where he'd bin. He died just as an English officer—a Major Claymore—burst in t' door. T' horrid man were after t' secret place where your father hid t' crown. So mad he was, he thrust his saber through t' body. Then he searched it. 'Twas in y'r father's sporran he found t' note wi' clues tae t' hidin' place. Y'r mother and I saw it all. She died soon after, poor woman, of grief."

"But if that English officer got Da's note, how can ye—"

"Ach, laddie, he were hungry, that dirty hound. I served him soup—wi' plenty o' dogbane. Dogbane f'r an English dog!"

Andrew could hardly believe it. His kindly grandmother a *murderer*? But he didn't doubt her story, especially when she opened the family Bible and handed him the soiled note:

(1) Each of the houses that sheltered me after my sad leavetaking of our noble prince is the largest in its town. The famous crown entrusted to me I secreted behind a fireplace in one of the seven great houses. Each house has a stone fireplace in its drawing room, dining hall, master bedroom, and scullery. The various fireplaces in the seven houses are colored red, ochre, dark brown, grey, yellow, pink, and mottled. In each house no two fireplaces have the same color. Furthermore, no house has a fireplace the same color as that in the corresponding room in any of the other six.

(2) The seven great houses were each built in a different year. The oldest was built in 1300, the newest in 1440. I stayed in the former just before fleeing to the latter. The newest house has no fireplace of red, brown, or mottled stone; the oldest house has none of ochre, grey, or pink. The other five houses date from 1320, 1340, 1360, 1400, and 1420.

(3) I stayed in the house with the brown drawing room fireplace just after I left the one with the yellow dining hall fireplace and just before I departed for the house with the grey master bedroom fireplace. These three houses were built in 1320, 1360, and 1400 (but not necessarily in that order).

(4) I stayed in the house with the brown dining hall fireplace just after I left the one with the ochre scullery fireplace and just before I went to the one with the yellow master bedroom fireplace. These

three houses have drawing room fireplaces of red, grey, and mottled stone. Later I took refuge in the newest of the seven houses.

(5) The second house I visited had a master bedroom fireplace the exact color as the scullery fireplace in the sixth house that took me in, which is the same color as the dining hall fireplace in the seventh house. The drawing room fireplace in the first house that sheltered me is the same color as the scullery fireplace in the fifth, which is the same color as the master bedroom fireplace in the seventh.

(6) The third house of my fateful journey is exactly a century older than the fifth. The second is exactly twenty years older than the seventh. The first house is exactly twenty years older than the fourth.

(7) The fifth house contains no red or ochre fireplace.

(8) The master bedroom fireplace of the second house is not ochre. The drawing room fireplace of the third house is not red.

(9) The drawing room fireplace in the fifth house is the same color as one of the fireplaces in the house that was built forty years later. This latter fireplace, behind which I secreted the priceless crown entrusted to me, is in the room corresponding to the one with the brown fireplace in the house that offered me shelter just before. God bless and protect Scotland forever!

Andrew pondered the note while his grandmother sat silently watching. The wall clock slowly ticked off seconds—minutes—an hour. The candles burned lower. All at once he leapt up and shouted, "Gran! I *know* where Da hid t' crown of Robert t' Bruce!"

"Do naught rash, laddie," she advised. "'Tis safer there than here for now. When ye hae bairns of y'r ain and they grow tae men, ye can tell thim y'r secret. Ach, someday Scotland will be agin free and t' crown can coom back tae its proper place in Edinburgh Castle."

Where did McNally hide the crown of Robert the Bruce?

See page 91 for the solution to the July/August puzzle.

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Can you use help working these puzzles?

If so, try "Solving the 'Unsolved,'" a 24-page booklet by Robert Kesling that shows you how most logic puzzles are solved. Send your name and address with a check for \$1.50 for postage and handling, made payable to AHMM, to:

"UNSOLVED," ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE
1270 AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS, NEW YORK, NY 10020

FICTION

GOOD BUSINESS

Geoffrey Hitchcock



Illustration by David Bond

95

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 9/98

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On the morning of the eighth day Benson woke with a clear head capable of clear thought, unclouded by emotion. The knowledge that he must soon die reduced his thinking to a level of absolute honesty. There was no time for justification of his actions, past or present. There was no real reason for thinking at all—he was here, and by nightfall or perhaps next morning he would be dead. He drank his last half cup of water and tossed the cup away.

And that was that. If nobody had found him in eight days, there was no real chance they'd find him in ten. Why would anybody want to find him? Crystal? She'd be better off without him. She had only married him for his money, and she'd get that automatically now and be free to go off with whichever of her lovers she chose. Fuller, the number two in his company? He could only gain by Benson's death. His "friends," Smith, Jensen, Dietrich, Sorenson? Just acquaintances at the businessmen's club who would be better off without his misleading information. Real friends he could still count on his fingers if he'd lost both hands in an accident. Well, that was business—you had to be hard to get to the top.

If anybody did find him, it would be Wesson because Wesson needed his money and it was because of Wesson that he was in this predicament. No, that wasn't true. It was because of his mistrust of Wesson that he was in this jam.

He and Bill had been good friends way back in the early days when Bill had been struggling to get his engineering business going, and an excellent business it could have been. But when he'd needed a little extra capital, his friend Julian Benson had foreclosed on him and ruined him. Hardly the way to keep a friend, but it made good business sense and that was what it was all about. Bill Wesson had taken himself off to Australia a bitter man, leaving the way clear for Benson to marry the lovely Crystal.

Benson had been fond of Crystal, even loved her after his fashion. She was the showpiece of his success and she'd enjoyed this at first, but he had left her alone too much with nothing to do. Ah well.

And now, after all these years, Bill Wesson had written to him with a business proposition. He had staked a claim somewhere in the South Australian desert, and he was sure it was gold rich. He needed ninety thousand dollars to develop it. There was nothing secret about it—Bill had enclosed a detailed map—but had warned him. "If you want to come see for yourself, let me know, and I'll take you out. The desert is no place for beginners. One mistake can be fatal, and you know how stupid you are with mechanical things."

Julian could have sent Bill ninety thousand dollars without noticing it was missing. He could thereby have made some restitution to his onetime friend for the injury he had done him, but his business acumen came to the fore: Wesson needed money—what was in it for

Benson? How much could he make out of the deal? What impossible terms could he impose on Bill this time?

So he had come to see exactly what was there, not just what Wesson was prepared to show him. How did he know old Bill wasn't trying to pull a fast one on him? Maybe all the gold was really out there just for the taking, and all Wesson needed the money for was to buy a secondhand digger or something that would gain him enough to finance the big stuff. There'd be nothing much for Benson in that deal. He'd have to make sure it didn't happen.

You couldn't trust anybody—that was the first rule of good business. Wesson trusted everybody, and look where that had got him—still driving round in ancient vehicles. Why else was his map marked in miles? A pity. He'd been a genius with machinery but stupid in the things that mattered. When to borrow, when to lend . . . when to foreclose.

So Julian had come to see for himself. He had booked a flight from Auckland to Melbourne; as far as anybody knew, he was on a business trip to Australia and would be back in about a fortnight. He had told no one about the mine—you mustn't let that sort of thing get about. He hadn't heeded Bill's warning. Maybe he wasn't a grade A mechanic, but he wasn't stupid either. He'd bought a brand new Land Rover in Melbourne and driven it to Adelaide and had had it checked over before turning off into the desert laden with ample food and water for two weeks and five twenty-gallon drums of fuel. What could go wrong? He was determined to see the mine for himself, not just what Wesson wanted him to see.

But he had made a mistake. Several mistakes. He hadn't got lost—he had followed Bill's map very carefully and had found the track, you couldn't call it a road, without difficulty—but he had run out of daylight not much more than forty miles short of his destination. As the light started to fade, he realized that using only his headlights he wouldn't be able to follow the tire marks that made the track, and straying from it might be one of the fatal mistakes his onetime friend had warned him about. In any case the driving hadn't been easy, and he was getting tired.

He climbed stiffly out of his seat and walked a little way down the track to get his muscles working properly. He watched the desert change, quite quickly, from red to purple to black and saw the stars come out. Millions of them. Then he walked back; the headlights showed him where home was. It had been very pleasant to relax in the cool of the evening after the heat of the day, which had been trying in spite of the air conditioner. He rooted around in the back of the Land Rover, found his little gas stove and billy-can, and set them up at the edge of the headlights' beam. Kneeling on the warm sand, he boiled up a billy full of baked beans mixed with a can of tomatoes,

which he ate with a thick slice of brown bread. He rinsed the almost empty billy, boiled more water, and finished the meal with a mug of coffee laced with whisky. It wasn't exactly what he was used to, but he felt a real sense of accomplishment. It was the first time he had ever cooked a meal. Or washed the dishes.

He climbed into the Rover, switched off the headlights, and turned on the ceiling light. Even here, away in the desert, there was work to be done. He opened his briefcase and got out the contract documents that Carstairs in the legal department had prepared for his approval. Carstairs was a master of the legal loophole, of the tax dodge, of fine print. After about an hour he found his head beginning to nod and his eyes beginning to dim.

Time for sleep. He switched off the lights, stripped off his shirt and pants, crawled into his sleeping bag, and rolled under the truck.

He woke to another bright day with the thought that he must be off as soon as possible. Then that there was no hurry. After he made a mug of coffee, he sponged himself down, being sparing with the water. A bowl of cereal with dried milk and water, gear stowed, and he was ready for the last lap. He sat in the cab, straightened his shoulders, and turned the key. The starter gave a dismal groan and died. The battery was flat.

He sat in a state of panic. What had Bill Wesson said about his being a fool with mechanical things? Maybe Bill had been right. He could have wept when he remembered how he had eaten with the headlights blazing. He had flattened batteries before by leaving the lights on on foggy mornings. What had he done then? He'd borrowed Crystal's car. Or got a couple of strong men to give him a shove. Or phoned the garage. Phoned the garage! He found his receipt from the garage in Adelaide, reached for his cell phone, and pressed the numbers. Nothing. No response at all. No engaged signal. No ringing tone.

Nothing. He tried emergency numbers—111 (nothing), 911 (nothing), 999 (no response). He remembered then that his secretary, who had got the damn thing for him, told him he could telephone anywhere in the world with it, providing he wasn't out of range of a transmitter. There were transmitters everywhere in the cities. But here? He was probably three or four hundred miles from the nearest cell. In sheer frustration he hurled it into the desert.

He sat for a while regaining his composure. There was no garage. There were tools stowed under the drums of fuel, but if he dug them out, what would he do with them? He had absolutely no idea. There was no Crystal's car to borrow. No strong men to push. Very well then, he would have to push it himself.

There followed four days of trial by ordeal. He spent the first in trying to start the truck by pushing it. He had to heave from behind to get it rolling, then run round and jump in the door, but it always

stopped moving before he could get it in gear. It was hopeless. If only the track hadn't been so level. He braved the afternoon sun to look for a downward slope and found one about two miles on, where the track crossed a dry watercourse. He managed to get back before the sun devoured him but only just.

The next three days had been spent pushing the truck for as long as he could endure the heat. He'd never thought it could take so long, but the brute was too heavy for slack and aching city muscles, even when the track was free of stones and sand. He had to keep sweeping it as he went along, filling in the hollows. And then, after all that, the damn thing had run off the track and put its left front foot into a sizable hole, and that was the end of that exercise.

He still had two options. He had food and water and a patch of shade, so he could survive for a couple of weeks and hope to be found. But Bill Wesson didn't know he was here because he hadn't written to him, and to everyone else he was worth more dead than alive. No—he had to do something, or the heat and the desert would drive him mad. He would walk out at night. It was barely forty miles to the mine. He could be there tomorrow.

But what if it were all a trap? An elaborate plan for revenge, a track that led to nowhere? No, Bill's mind didn't work like that—he was too simple. Besides, it was all of twenty years ago. A man couldn't bear a grudge that long, could he? But what if resentment built up with each successive failure? And there must have been plenty of failures—that would be Bill's style. Witness the ancient vehicle and the need for ninety thousand dollars. A pittance he could have borrowed from anywhere if his credit had been good. It wasn't worth the risk—better to go back the way he'd come. It wasn't much more than a hundred and twenty miles to the railway. A hundred and twenty miles wasn't far to walk, was it? He'd start that night and hole up when the heat got too fierce.

But it was not to be. It might have been heat exhaustion or nervous frustration or a surfeit of baked beans and bully beef, but whatever it was, his stomach decided to tie itself in knots so that he writhed on the hot sand in agony. Then came the diarrhea that relieved the pain but left him weak.

The fifth day was a day of recuperation, self-pity, and cursing. Of becoming obsessed with the idea that Wesson was out to get him. Everything seemed to point to it, but by God, he wasn't finished yet. Tomorrow night he'd start the walk out. There was no hurry. The longer he waited, the more moonlight there'd be.

Day six was the day of the storm. Benson was lying on a blanket in the four o'clock shade when he became aware of a roaring sound. He sprang up and saw a huge column of dust bearing down on him. He had seen several small dust devils whirling across the desert in the

heat of the afternoons, but this was something else. A moment's horror gave way to action. He was in the cab, slamming the door, when it struck. The truck was lifted briefly and spun round. Benson clung to the wheel and prayed. The force slackened, but the air was full of flying sand as the whirlwind moved off into the distance, taking with it all the things he had put in the shade. His blanket and jacket, his tinned food, and his full water cans. He still had a hundred gallons of fuel and an almost empty can of water. A briefcase, a suitcase of clothes, and a sleeping bag.

Day seven was the day of despair and near madness.

Day eight was the day of clear thinking. He found himself standing outside, as it were, looking at his past quite dispassionately. There was the Bill Wesson affair. Bill wasn't clever with money. He had bitten off more than he could chew. A loan that Benson could have given him without prejudice to his own company might well have put Bill on his feet. Or it might have put him deeper in the mire. Benson had foreclosed and bankrupted him, forcing him to make a new start in a new country. Perhaps he had done Bill a favor. It didn't matter, it was done. The salient feature of the affair was that Benson had made his foreclosure for only one reason—profit for himself.

He thought of the many other transactions he had carried out with the same motive and the same result. He thought of the times he had turned other people's indiscretions to his own advantage. He thought of all the thriving small industries he had swallowed up in the name of good business. He thought of Crystal, his beautiful status symbol. He had bankrupted her, too, by foreclosing on love, companionship, and trust. He had trusted no one, and now it had backfired on him.

Benson felt a passionate desire to write it all down. He had a briefcase full of paper typed on one side only. He had a pen, several pens. He sat in the shade of the Land Rover and wrote. There was nothing to interrupt him—no phone—no cups of tea—no lunch. Only the passage of the sun forcing him to move from time to time. Once he had a flash of inspiration and wrote a check—pay William Wesson ninety thousand dollars. He was still writing at three o'clock when the heat overcame him. He crawled under the truck like a dying dog and collapsed.

Day nine was the day Bill Wesson found him on his way to town for supplies. The last time he'd been to town he'd expected to find a letter from Benson, but there had been none. He assumed that his request had been ignored. He might at least have written, Bill thought. I suppose I should have sent a stamped addressed envelope and a sheet of paper. He'd been relieved in a way. Better to struggle on his own than to get involved with Julian again. Funny to think that mean bastard had once been his friend.

And now here was the silly bugger lying under the latest model

Land Rover, dehydrated to a state of unconsciousness. What the hell had happened? How long had he been lying there? He found a blanket, laid Benson on it in the shade, and doused him with water. There wasn't anything else he could do. He didn't dare try to get him to drink, and he had no means of introducing water into the other end. He went to his trusty old Jeep and radioed for the air ambulance.

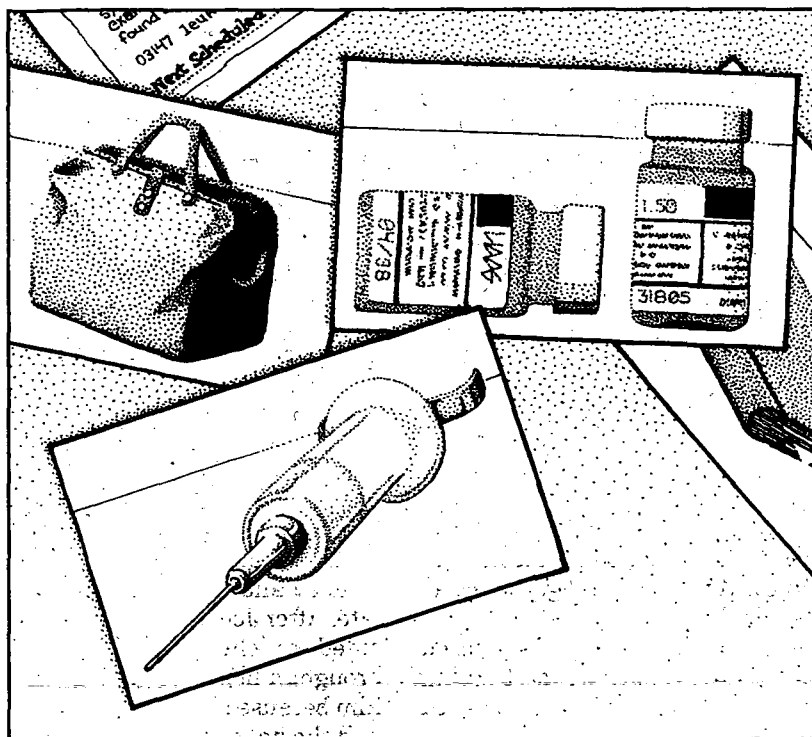
Then he went and sat by his onetime friend to comfort him as best he could. A briefcase lay on the other side of the vehicle, and sheets of paper were scattered on the sand. Clearly Benson had been writing on the back of some legal document. Bill read with great interest. Written, no doubt, in that state of clearheadedness that comes just before delirium takes over and unconsciousness follows. Bill knew; he had been through it. He pocketed the check with a grin—ninety thousand and no strings attached! He gathered up the papers and put them in his Jeep. "Julian, you bastard," he said aloud, "if I were a gentleman, I would burn these and go away and leave you. It would be better for everyone, including yourself. But you wouldn't approve of that—it wouldn't be good business, would it?"

He went back to the Land Rover to have a look at it. He sighed as he dug under the fuel drums for the tool kit and got out the crank handle. Might as well be comfortable while we're waiting, he thought as he cranked the engine to life.

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John H. Dirckx



in the life of a pathologist—and a female voice at the other end of the wire called him John, he didn't need to ask who was calling.

"Rose! What's the matter?"

"George is dead."

"Dead! When? Where? Did he have another hemorrhage?"

“I don’t know. I just found him —” Her voice faltered. “John, can you come? I don’t know what to do.”

“I’ll be there in half an hour. Are you sure he’s dead?”

“Oh yes. He must have been dead for—” Again a sob choked off her words. “Please hurry.”

Dr. Bushkow dressed hastily, gathered up a few things, and drove through dark, deserted streets to the somewhat seedy neighborhood where Dr. George Ewing had lived and carried on his medical practice. Somewhere a muffled chime was striking three as he parked in front of the brown brick double. There were lights in the first floor windows on both sides of the building, the living side and the office side.

Despite the late winter chill the door to the office stood open. Before Dr. Bushkow reached it, Rose Ewing appeared, red-eyed and shaken, to admit him.

“I didn’t want you to ring the bell and wake up Joe. He doesn’t know yet. What am I going to say to him?”

Dr. Bushkow briefly squeezed her hand, and instead of trying to answer her question he asked her another. “Where’s George?”

Wordlessly she led him down a hall to Ewing’s study, which was lit only by the desk lamp. The body lay on its side on a leather-covered couch in front of the curtained window, in an attitude of repose. The chalky pallor of the skin, accentuated by a narrow black mustache, and the fixed immobility of the limbs, already

growing stiff, rendered any examination for signs of life quite superfluous. A woollen blanket, roughly folded, lay on the desk chair.

“Is this the way you found him?” asked Bushkow.

“Yes. He got home from the hospital about two this afternoon and came straight in here. He’d often lie down there and take a nap for an hour or two on Wednesdays, since he didn’t have appointments. I called him for dinner twice from the waiting room, but he didn’t come and I decided I should let him rest. He was such a—a bear if anyone woke him up suddenly from a nap.”

She stood leaning against the door jamb, gazing at her husband’s placid features as if looking for some lingering trace of his former irascibility. Bushkow interpreted her remark in the light of his own experience, which was that George Ewing had been a bear at all times, and more so than ever in recent months.

“Joey and I watched TV until late. After Joey went to bed, I decided to check on George. I brought a blanket down to cover him because it had turned colder and the heat goes off on this side of the building at ten. I didn’t like the way he looked by the hall light, so I turned on this one, and—”

“Why don’t you go and fix us some coffee?” suggested Bushkow. “I’m going to have a better look at him, and then we’ll decide what we need to do next.”

Before she had the coffee ready

he joined her in the kitchen. "Had George been feeling ill lately? I mean besides the stomach problem? Any chest pain, shortness of breath . . ."

"No. Tireder maybe, and irritable."

"Had he been taking any medicine?"

"Just the one pill Dr. Shortmiller gave him after the X-rays showed the ulcer and the blood test showed it wasn't from an infection."

Bushkow watched in silence while she poured coffee and got milk from the refrigerator. "I think I'll go call Shortmiller," he said.

"Now? What good will that do?"

"I don't know. It's kind of awkward, but—somebody has to sign George's death certificate."

"Well, couldn't you do that?"

She stood in the middle of the kitchen looking forlorn and bewildered, holding her coffee cup in both hands instead of drinking from it. "I mean, you've seen him —"

"It's not as simple as that." He avoided her searching gaze. "A cause of death has to be entered. Maybe it's just my background as a pathologist, but—I don't feel I can call this a heart attack. Not in a man of forty-three who's had no previous signs of heart trouble. And there's no evidence the ulcer bled again. I think there ought to be an autopsy."

"Oh, John, is that really necessary? I mean, he's gone. Finding out what he died of isn't going to bring him back."

He conceded the point with a nod. "All the same, technically George's death is a coroner's case. I'm going to call Shortmiller and see what he thinks." He took his coffee back to the office, leaving her still standing in the middle of the floor, sipping coffee and looking out the dark window above the sink into infinity.

Twenty minutes later he found her in the same spot, the empty cup now in the sink. "I know this is hard, Rose, but I talked to Fred Shortmiller and he agreed with me the coroner should be notified. So I called downtown; they'll be coming by in a few minutes."

"You mean—to take him away?"

"Yes."

Now she was crying. "But what's the use? I mean—it's not as if anybody thought he'd been killed."

She misinterpreted his silence as a token of sympathy and of respect for the dead.

Around four thirty A.M. a white van drew up to the curb behind Bushkow's car. Again Rose Ewing met the visitor on the porch outside the office entrance so the doorbell wouldn't wake her sleeping son. Nick Stamaty, the coroner's investigator, was a squarely built ex-detective with dark curly hair and a suave, sympathetic manner that he could slip on as easily as his gold-rimmed glasses when he was talking to next of kin.

Bushkow got the preliminaries over quickly and sent Rose back to the house while he and Stamaty went in to view the body.



Much later they found her huddled in the breakfast nook talking long distance on the phone to her mother.

"I need to ask you just a couple of questions, Mrs. Ewing," said Stamaty when she had hung up. "There may be more questions later, but these can't wait. Was Dr. Ewing taking any medicine besides what was prescribed by Dr. Shortmiller for his ulcer?"

"Not as far as I know. I already told Dr. Bushkow that."

"Did he ever use . . . drugs, to your knowledge?"

"Oh no, certainly not. Why would you ask that?"

Stamaty looked at Bushkow. "The fact is, Mrs. Ewing, that Dr. Bushkow and I both feel that there are indications that your husband had taken something more than his ulcer medicine before he died. His pupils are constricted down to pinpoint size."

She gave a little sniff of impatience. "His eyes always looked that way when he was tired," she said. Stamaty and the doctor exchanged glances a second time.

A private hearse, summoned by Stamaty, arrived shortly, and two stolid, sleepy men carried out the remains. No sooner had the door closed behind them and Stamaty than Joey Ewing, a pale, weedy, round-shouldered boy of fourteen, appeared on the stairs in his pajamas and stood staring inquiringly down at his mother and Bushkow, who were talking quietly in the hall.

She rushed to meet him at the landing and engulfed him in a

silent embrace from which he drew away in embarrassment and confusion. "Daddy's dead, honey," she blurted, unable to hold back the evil tidings. "They just took him away."

Joe shrank farther back, paler than before, his eyes dark, dry, wondering. Then he vanished up the stairs again with a furious thrashing of bare feet.

"Joe!"

"Leave him to himself for a while, Rose," Bushkow advised from the hall below. "He'll come to you later. You'd better get some sleep, and so had I. Will you be all right?"

"I guess so." She was still on the landing swaying slightly in the shadows. "Thanks for coming, John."

"I'm sorry it went the way it did. I'll call you in the morning."

A few minutes past noon the next day, Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn arrived at the Ewings' to initiate the police investigation into Dr. George Ewing's death. Auburn was accompanied by another detective named Kestrel, who had a full-time assignment as an evidence technician. They rang at the doctor's residence, not the office.

Rose Ewing received them in a dusty living room where the carpet and most of the furniture were worn to the point of shabbiness. The surroundings hardly matched the standard image of the American physician's lifestyle. Auburn half expected to find a framed sampler hanging

on the wall over the fireplace saying OUR OTHER HOUSE IS A CASTLE.

Unknown to him, Dr. Bushkow had warned Rose Ewing by phone a short time earlier that the coroner had placed certain facts in the hands of the police and that they would be coming to interview her and examine the scene. As a result she'd worked up a certain amount of indignation before they arrived.

But by the time Auburn had made a few preliminary inquiries, with tact and sympathy, about the circumstances of her husband's death, her manner had mellowed considerably.

"I'm sorry to have to be the one to tell you this, Mrs. Ewing," said Auburn, "but your husband died of a very large overdose of morphine." Bushkow had already told her that. "Apparently given as an injection in his right thigh."

"Given? Then you don't think it was suicide?" She was a small woman inclined to plumpness, with a face like a sleepy cat's and a languid manner to match. Maybe that came from a sleepless night.

"That's what we have to try to find out. Did you think he committed suicide?"

"I don't know what to think. George was a terribly moody man always. And more so for the past year or so. Sometimes he was so rude to patients that they didn't come back—except the ones he forgot to charge."

Kestrel, a heavy aluminum field kit at his feet, was sitting mute

in the corner, but it was to him she addressed her answers rather than to Auburn, who happened to be African-American. Auburn was used to that, and it didn't bother him as long as she kept answering.

"Did he ever talk about taking his own life?"

She pushed wisps of hair back from her pale forehead. "He didn't usually talk about anything. He was that kind of person—reserved, uncommunicative."

"Had he been particularly upset about anything recently, do you think?" asked Auburn.

"I'd say yes, but I don't know what it was. I thought it was his health. He hemorrhaged from a stomach ulcer right before Christmas, and since then he's seemed especially grumpy."

"Was he in the hospital for the ulcer?"

"Just for one day. Dr. Shortmiller was taking care of him. He could give you the details."

Auburn nodded. "The coroner has already talked to him. I wonder if we might look over the doctor's office."

"I guess so. Brownie's there—George's nurse."

Kestrel picked up his case, and they followed Mrs. Ewing. A doorway had been cut between the two sides of the double house when the right side was converted to a medical office. As they passed through this to the doctor's waiting room, they could hear an animated dialogue taking place in one of the treatment rooms.



"Is it out?" inquired a piercing juvenile voice.

"It's out," was the gravelly retort.

"Can I have it?"

"I'm giving it to Mother so you won't have it back in your heel ten minutes after you get home."

"Ow! That stuff hurts worse than the splinter."

"It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that sting."

"Don't got."

"Whatever. Hold still while I put on a bandage."

"I want a dinosaur one."

"We're fresh out. If you want a dinosaur bandage, take your next splinter to the dinosaur doctor. There you go, pal."

"Do I get a sucker?"

"Suckers rot your teeth. Here's a cricket."

An irregular staccato of metallic clicks ensued immediately.

"Can I have one for Mark Edward?"

"You may not. Tell Mark Edward to get a splinter in his own foot if he wants a cricket."

A third voice of maternal timbre instructed the patient to tell Brownie thank you.

In a few moments a five-year-old, assiduously manipulating her cricket while hopping and stamping to get her heel back into her shoe, erupted from the treatment room followed by her mother and a nurse in a white dress and cap.

The mother, recognizing Mrs. Ewing, expressed her sympathy in conventional tones and made a rapid exit with her child. Mrs.

Ewing left Auburn and Kestrel with Brownie.

Dr. Ewing's office nurse was built like a fullback, wore her iron-gray hair in shingles and bangs, and had a complexion the color of a stop sign. Auburn automatically took note of unadorned and unpierced earlobes, ringless fingers, square-cut nails without polish, and boxy rubber-soled shoes that had been freshly whitened that morning.

"I guess you want to see where he died," she said in a businesslike tone. It took no great skill in human psychology to see that her fixed and flinty smile was masking and holding in check an inner tumult of violent emotion.

"Eventually," said Auburn. "Would it be convenient for you to answer a couple of questions first?"

"Sure. Come on in here." She led them to the office behind the reception counter. "I need a break. I've been calling patients for two hours to cancel appointments, and I've had about enough of it. Two people expressed sympathy and concern for the family. The rest of them seemed to think it was an outrage that their doctor had the bad manners to die before they did. But that's show biz."

The office, decorated with vine wreaths, bows in pastel pink and purple, and humorous posters, was simply too small to accommodate three adults. Brownie sat behind the counter while Auburn and Kestrel found seats in the waiting room.


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Auburn recorded her name, Miss Candace Browne with an e, and other identifying data on a three-by-five-inch file card and then put it away. "How long had you been with Dr. Ewing?" he asked.

"Twelve years. Ever since he started in practice. I was with Dr. Tamaska in this office for almost twenty years before that."

"When was the last time you saw Dr. Ewing?"

"About one thirty yesterday afternoon when he came in from the hospital. I was just leaving. I have Wednesday afternoons off because the office is closed. I volunteer at the canteen for the homeless on Wells Street."

"Did he seem his usual self yesterday?"

"I'd say so. I barely saw him." She paused for reflection, then became more voluble and frank. "You couldn't ever tell with Doctor what he was thinking or feeling. He was one of these people whose facial expressions never change. You know?"

Auburn nodded his understanding.

"You're probably aware that Dr. Ewing died of an overdose of morphine."

She flinched as if he'd slapped her face. "I had no idea. How could I?"

"Mrs. Ewing seemed to know already. Probably through the medical grapevine."

Candace Browne stiffened. "Mrs. Ewing and I don't operate on the same wavelength," she said soberly. "Do you know she

waited until I came in to work at nine o'clock this morning to tell me Doctor was dead?"

"I gather you two don't get along."

"Let's just say I'm a string-saver and she's not. I don't want to talk about that. Tell me about this morphine."

"It was a large overdose, injected into the right thigh."

"I can't get over that. You mean he gave it to himself?"

"I suppose if we knew that we wouldn't be here bothering you with silly questions. Do you think it's possible he killed himself?"

"I guess so. He was the most irritable, unpredictable man I've ever known. One day he'd be kindness itself, and the next he'd eat you alive."

"Doesn't sound like a very good qualification in the doctor business."

"I don't know. He was good with children, and he could be awfully sweet to the old patients, too. But he'd yell at the teenagers just for being teenagers. I wouldn't repeat what he called boys with ponytails and earrings."

"Did any of these people ever yell back at him? Threaten him?"

"Not that I remember. Not lately, anyway. He was bigger than most of them."

"Had there been any squabbles over bills or anything like that?"

"Do you see that rack? That's Accounts Receivable. Our patients don't argue about bills. They just don't pay them. And Doctor refused to use a collection agency."



"All right. Let's just suppose somebody was mad enough at Dr. Ewing to kill him. Mrs. Ewing feels it's possible they could have come in through the office entrance yesterday afternoon, found him asleep, and given him a fatal injection of morphine without anybody outside the office knowing anything about it. What do you think?"

"Oh my." She pondered long, running her eye across the rows of filing cabinets along the wall without seeing them. "The office door should have been locked."

"Is it possible the doctor arranged to see a patient yesterday afternoon, even though the office was normally closed on Wednesday?"

"It's very possible. He didn't write anything down here—" she indicated the blank space for Wednesday in the appointment book that lay open on the counter "—but he might have made a note in his pocket memo book. That'll probably be on the desk in his study."

"That's the room where Mrs. Ewing found him?"

"Yes. Back this way."

Kestrel, who had been lurking in the background all this time with the bored and slightly embarrassed air of a distant cousin at a wedding reception, now came suddenly to life. "Before we go in," he said, "has anybody cleaned up in there since last night? Put things away, dusted, emptied the trash?"

Brownie shook her head emphatically. "No, sir. You're look-

ing at the maid, and I haven't been back there today."

"Have you noticed that anything was disturbed, out of place, or missing anywhere in the office?"

"Just the pamphlet rack and toybox there in the waiting room. Mrs. Ewing said they had to move them last night when they came through with the stretcher."

Kestrel picked up his case. "We'll let you get on with your work if you'll just point us in the right direction," said Auburn. "We promise not to make any messes or steal anything."

Dr. Ewing's study was at the end of the hall that led back from the waiting room past the doors of four treatment rooms, two on either side. After one wistful look around the room, Brownie went back to her telephoning. Kestrel took a compact flash camera from his case and began doing what he did best.

The study was roughly square, with a desk, a crowded bookcase, two side chairs in matching wood, and a worn leather couch against the rear wall. Papers, folders, diet lists, and samples of medicine in blister packs were arranged in neat rows on the desktop. At one side of the study was a small bathroom and on the other a room that evidently served as a laboratory and storage closet.

All three rooms bore traces of their former residential function. In the study and the laboratory, a dark wainscoting extended halfway up the wall. The plaster

had been finished in a freestyle fingerwave, the sort of decor that, along with steak on Sunday and a convertible in the garage, had been the height of every middle-class family's aspirations when the house was built.

After shooting a number of pictures, Kestrel put on rubber gloves and began a painstaking search of the premises, beginning with the trash cans. Auburn sat at the desk where Dr. Ewing had daily presided, passing sentence of life and death on his patients, dispensing medical wisdom seasoned with churlishness. He closed his eyes, trying to soak up atmosphere. What he noticed mainly was a potent reek of chemicals, drugs, and disinfectants that seemed to come in waves from the laboratory.

Ewing's pocket memorandum book wasn't on or in the desk. Auburn interrupted Brownie at her telephoning to ask about the book. "A thick book with a red plastic cover, about four by six inches. He might have had it in his jacket pocket."

"I'll check with the coroner's office about it. Officer Kestrel was wondering where you keep the morphine."

"In the safe. But I don't have the key. Dr. Ewing carried it on his key ring, and I'm sure that was in his pocket."

The safe was a paltry affair of sheet metal built into one of the laboratory cabinets. It showed no signs of tampering. According to Brownie it contained a few narcotics, a few documents, and usu-

ally a small amount of cash. Kestrel dusted the safe perfunctorily for latent fingerprints and found only smudges.

With the study door closed, Auburn used the phone on the desk to call Stamaty at the coroner's office. Neither the memorandum book nor the keys were among the personal effects found on the body.

"Haven't seen one of these for a while," said Kestrel. He lifted a battered medical bag from the floor to a chair. "I wonder if he really made house calls." He opened the bag and started lifting things out and placing them in a row on the desk.

"Talk about antiques!" He took out a shiny metal tube, handling only the brown rubber cap at one end, and held it up to the light. Something inside it rattled faintly. "This looks promising," he said, talking more to himself than to Auburn. "Fresh prints, and the cap isn't on tight."

"What is it?"

"A case for a hypodermic syringe. About a generation out of date, since they only use disposable ones nowadays. Still, maybe for house calls . . ." His voice trailed off as he became engrossed in his investigation. Working the cap off with great care, he slid a glass syringe out on the desk blotter.

"Where's the needle?" asked Auburn.

"That'll be in another case somewhere. But look at this. The syringe was in there backwards—that's why the cap wouldn't go



on tight. I think we're onto something."

"Any morphine in the bag?"

"One thing at a time." With maddening deliberation, Kestrel stowed the syringe and case in specimen containers and labeled them before digging deeper in the bag. He found both needles and a nearly empty vial of morphine in a neat case containing other injectable drugs as well.

When they had exhausted the office, they started on the laboratory, which was really little more than a cubbyhole. Beneath a row of wooden cabinets, which must surely have begun life in a kitchen or pantry, ran a counter on which a sterilizer, a microscope, an incubator, rows of bottles, and racks of test tubes stood cheek by jowl, with no room to spare. Two tables set against the opposite wall groaned beneath jugs and cartons of medical supplies. The place afforded about as much elbow room as a motel bathtub, and Auburn soon found it expedient to get out of Kestrel's way.

"If you get bored out there," said Kestrel after a while, kneeling with his face a few inches from the cracked linoleum floor, "you might get a card of prints on Brownie. And the widow."

Auburn found Mrs. Ewing just hanging up the telephone in the breakfast nook and looking considerably more distraught than he had left her forty-five minutes earlier.

"I can't find my son Joey," she told him, a frantic note creeping into her voice. "I thought he was

still up in bed until after you came. But he's gone—he may have been gone for hours. I've been calling everywhere—"

"Has he ever run away before?"

"No. I'm sure this is just his way of reacting to his father's death, but it's frightening not being able to track him down."

"Was he particularly close to his father?"

She shook her head briskly, with a movement almost like a shudder. "They didn't get along at all. George was a difficult father. He could be awfully demanding. And harsh."

"Has your boy been in any kind of trouble?"

"No. Not the kind you mean. But he's had a lot of problems at school. They say he's bright but he lacks motivation. And his behavior is disruptive. Of course that only added to the tension between him and his father."

"Has he got a girlfriend?"

"Nobody special that I know of."

"Any problem with drugs?"

"Officer, he's only fourteen."

Auburn didn't comment on that. He unpacked the portable outfit from Kestrel's case and took an inked set of her fingerprints. Her hands were like bunches of carrots fresh from the refrigerator.

A search through Dr. Ewing's things in the master bedroom, a dark, drab, airless room at the back of the house, failed to turn up either his keys or his memorandum book.

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Kestrel gave Brownie a receipt for some specimens he was taking away with him, including three disposable syringes extracted with elaborate precautions from hazardous waste containers in two of the treatment rooms. They left her, still phoning, a solitary and forlorn figure in the middle of the empty office.

"What have we got now, a Technicolor fax machine?" Auburn carried the two sheets of copy paper he'd found on his desk into Lieutenant Savage's office.

Both sheets bore rings and arrows in electric orange marker. "Stamaty pumped those through the pipes about half an hour ago," said Savage. "He says you can see the originals for the price of a beer. You see what I've got marked there?"

Auburn studied the sheets. They were copies of photographs Stamaty had shot last night. Both showed the body of Dr. Ewing lying on its side on the leather couch in his study. They also clearly showed a pocket memorandum book and a bunch of keys on the corner of the desk.

"Wait'll Kestrel sees these," said Auburn. "Somebody in that place is playing peekaboo with us."

"But that doesn't necessarily point to murder. Stamaty says he leafed through the book looking for a suicide note and didn't find anything except memos on Ewing's patients and some loose medical reports. But somebody

in the house may be trying to cover up something." Savage got up from his desk and wandered to the window.

"I'm more concerned about the keys," said Auburn. "With them missing, I don't know who has access to the safe where the morphine is kept." He reported briefly on the course of the investigation so far. "Anything interesting from Dr. Valentine?"

"Nothing much. Time of death between five and eight P.M., but the fatal injection could have been given up to an hour earlier. The final autopsy report won't be available until tomorrow, after he looks at the microscope slides. Ewing had a big ulcer in his stomach, but that wasn't what killed him."

"No, but it might explain why he got killed. The picture I'm getting is that he was a world-class scumball who had been feistier than ever lately. He could easily have pushed somebody too far—a patient, a colleague, maybe somebody closer to home. And after seeing how neat he kept his desk and his lab, I can't imagine him shoving that syringe back in the case backwards—even if he'd just given himself a fatal dose of morphine."

Savage rubbed his eyes. "What I can't imagine is someone giving an injection of anything to a guy that big against his will. There was no sign of a struggle—"

"It might not have been so hard if he was asleep."

"He wouldn't stay asleep for long with a needle sticking in his



leg. And the morphine couldn't have put him out so fast that he wouldn't have tried to mop up the room with whoever was on the other end of the needle." He leaned back against the edge of his desk and rubbed his eyes again. "You know what I think, Cy? I think we'd better find that kid."

"I think you're right. His mother is about to go over the edge."

"You sure he's not hiding in a closet somewhere? Or locked in one?"

"We didn't go over there to find the kid," Auburn reminded him. "We didn't search the whole house, just the office and the doctor's bedroom."

A clerk put his head in the doorway to tell them Kestrel was on his way down from the crime lab and needed to see both of them urgently. Kestrel appeared in person almost at once, out of breath from running down the stairs from the top floor.

"I've got a positive make on the prints on the syringe and the case," he said. His voice quivered slightly, and his color wasn't so good, either. "George Joseph Ewing, Jr. The doctor's son."

"Where'd you get his prints?"

"We already had them. Taken when he was in the seventh grade. Project Upper Hand, the state program to help trace kidnapped and runaway children."

"You didn't waste any time pulling them."

"The finger-spread on the case was tight, like a kid's hand. Or a woman's. But they weren't the

prints of either the widow or the nurse."

The three of them stood looking at one another for a long minute, each a prey to his own foreboding, each feeling his own brand of anguish garnished with nausea.

"Okay, Cy," said Savage at length, "here's what you're going to do. Get on the phone to his mom, and if the kid hasn't turned up yet, get her to file a missing person report."

The reasoning behind this strategy was immediately apparent to both Auburn and Kestrel. Unless apprehended in the commission of a crime, a child under sixteen couldn't be arrested or held in custody without a warrant signed by a judge in the Juvenile Court. Normally this was a bench warrant, issued during a regular court session in response to a formal petition filed by a police officer.

The system worked well in protecting minors from hasty and intemperate police action in cases of petty crime, especially if the evidence was thin and unlikely to stand up in court. But at times it blocked an effective response to a volatile situation, as in the present instance. If Mrs. Ewing could be induced to report Joey as a missing person, and the police could find him before he turned up at home, they had legal grounds for taking him into custody, maybe long enough to establish a prima facie case for a charge of premeditated murder.

Auburn called Mrs. Ewing from



his office. By hinting vaguely at an abduction associated with her husband's murder, he easily persuaded her to report Joey as officially missing. She gave him a full description and told him what clothes were gone from Joey's room. "I'm getting really concerned," she said. "He doesn't have his winter coat, and who knows if he's had anything to eat? It's almost five o'clock."

"We share your concern, Mrs. Ewing, and we're going to do everything we can to find him, starting now. Please stay home and let me know if he turns up. I'll probably be at your place in about an hour." He hung up before she could reply and set about processing the missing person report.

Cyrus Auburn had a reputation for working nonstop on a homicide, at least during the first twenty-four hours. His legendary eagerness to put in overtime during the early stages of a murder investigation arose from his observation that the most promising time to glean useful evidence is while the body is still warm, when trace evidence is still present in abundance and the killer is still distracted by the emotional impact of the crime and most likely to commit some telltale blunder.

But the reason he went full blast at the case of Dr. Ewing was that he knew he wouldn't sleep until he had established the innocence or guilt of Joey Ewing.

Auburn went home for dinner,

had an extra cup of coffee while watching the national news, and was back at the Ewings' before seven. Joey was still missing. Auburn's arrival interrupted a somber tête-à-tête, over pizza, between Mrs. Ewing and Dr. John Bushkow, who had evidently supplied the pizza.

Although he wasn't a forensic pathologist, Dr. Bushkow served on the coroner's panel of consultants, and Auburn was slightly acquainted with him—a spare, dry man fond of bow ties and trenchcoats, with a tendency to stammer when giving medical evidence on the stand.

"I'm sure you're satisfied that Joey isn't anywhere in the house, Mrs. Ewing," said Auburn, "but I have instructions to make a thorough search of the premises. It could give us a lead as to where he went."

Bushkow cocked a quizzical eye at him but went on wiping his fingers, one at a time, on a paper napkin in silence. Mrs. Ewing stood in the middle of the kitchen floor, numb with shock and apparently unable to focus her thoughts. Her half of the pizza was practically untouched.

"If we might start with his room?" suggested Auburn.

The first thing he noticed on entering Joey's bedroom was a model of a saucer-shaped spacecraft made of pop cans that had been cut, shaped, and soldered together with considerable ingenuity. Hanging by a wire from the ceiling lamp, the craft cast a broad, eerie shadow over the mid-



dle of the room. Otherwise it was a typical teenage boy's bedroom—heterogeneous in decor, fluid in organization, and uncompromisingly expressive of its tenant's individualities.

Joey wasn't hiding under the bed or hanging in the closet. With exemplary restraint, since Mrs. Ewing was watching over his shoulder, Auburn probed the morass of sneakers, comic books, sweatshirts, and sporting gear on the floor of the closet and then looked through the articles piled haphazardly on the dresser and the desk. Something drew him back to the bed, where the covers were tumbled just as Joey'd left them when he'd gotten up in the middle of the night to investigate the commotion in the house. Between the mattress and the box springs he found Dr. Ewing's key ring and memorandum book.

"Would you know how these got here?" he asked.

"I suppose Joey must have put them there."

"Any idea why?" She shook her head wordlessly. "May I use your phone?"

He found Kestrel at home and persuaded him to return to the scene to go through the contents of the safe with him. Then he went back to Joey's room and, regardless of Mrs. Ewing's presence, took it apart. He found nothing else. The rest of the house proved equally unrewarding. In the basement and the attic he confined his efforts to making sure Joey wasn't hiding anywhere.

While waiting for Kestrel to get there he sat down in the living room and turned through the memorandum book. Most of Ewing's entries were cryptic, and many were illegible. Interleaved with the pages were various loose papers—letters, laboratory reports, charts and tables clipped from medical publications. One of the reports caught his attention because its edges were still crisp and clean whereas the other papers were crumpled and dogeared with wear. This one had been inserted at yesterday's date—the date of Ewing's death.

Auburn unfolded the sheet and examined its contents carefully. It was the report of a laboratory examination of cells obtained by gastric washing. As he waded through the jargon, it struck him that the report bore neither the patient's name nor the signature of the pathologist, nor, for that matter, the date or the name of the laboratory.

He found Bushkow sitting alone at the breakfast table in a meditative mood. "I understand Dr. Ewing had a stomach ulcer," said Auburn, taking the chair at the head of the table.

"That's right. He had a gastric hemorrhage back before Christmas, without any warning at all. Scared the daylights out of him."

"But I believe he'd been doing better lately?"

"As far as I know he had. George and I go all the way back to elementary school, but I haven't seen a lot of him in recent years. I'm based at St. Luke's

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Hospital, where he very seldom had patients, so our paths didn't cross often. But the last time I saw him he looked his usual obnoxious self."

He leaned toward Auburn and lowered his voice. "If you haven't already found it out for yourself, I can tell you George Ewing was a narrow-minded, arrogant, vindictive swine who made enemies wherever he went."

"Are you suggesting that one of those enemies, a colleague or a patient, got mad enough at him to put him out of the way with a fatal injection of morphine?"

Bushkow smiled cagily. "I believe that qualifies as a hypothetical question. I have no opinion, Your Honor."

"Well then, I'll ask you a question of fact instead. Just for the record, where were you yesterday afternoon?"

"From one to nine P.M. yesterday I was in my lab at St. Luke's," said Bushkow. He wasn't smiling now. "In full view of half a dozen technicians. Except during dinner, when I was in full view of at least a hundred people, most of whom know me by name."

Auburn examined the stained plastic placemat before him. "Were you involved in Dr. Ewing's medical care when he got sick, or later on?"

"No, not at all. When George got sick, I came over here and helped Rose persuade him to see a gastroenterologist. My field is pathology. I don't ordinarily do any medical practice, although I did help Brownie run the office

for a few days until George got back on his feet and I'll probably help Rose shut things down here."

"Would you be willing to speculate on whether or not Dr. Ewing committed suicide?"

"I'd say it was highly improbable."

"Maybe you'd give me your impression of this?" Auburn handed him the laboratory report from the memorandum book.

"Where did this come from?" asked Bushkow.

"Dr. Ewing's memo book—the one I found under Joey's mattress."

"Were you thinking this referred to George?"

"What do you think?"

"I'd say definitely not. I talked to Dr. Valentine this morning, right after he finished the autopsy. He's satisfied the ulcer was benign, though of course only the microscope slides can tell that for certain. George's specialist, Dr. Shortmiller, looked at the ulcer twice through a scope, and as far as I know he never even considered ordering gastric washings for malignant cells. If he'd wanted that kind of information, he would have taken a biopsy through the scope."

"And this report shows malignant cells?"

"Exactly. This is a cell block made from gastric washings. From the array of cells it contains, it's obvious that the patient has a highly malignant cancer that has eroded into the muscular wall of the stomach, causing both intense inflamma-

tion and bleeding. It's probably also spread to the lymph nodes and liver.

"In other words, the outlook is extremely grim for whoever's cells these are. What I don't understand is why there's no pathologist's signature on this report, and only a specimen number instead of the patient's name. That makes it practically useless."

"There's no date, either." Auburn took the report and examined its top and bottom edges. "It's an odd shape. It looks like somebody sliced off all the identifying data with a paper cutter. This is standard computer paper, and these ink-jet or laser printers are virtually untraceable." He stared at it in the dim yellow light of the breakfast nook, finally shook his head and put it away. "Probably a red herring." He wasn't entirely satisfied that Bushkow, Ewing's colleague and a friend of the family, was telling everything he knew.

At length Kestrel arrived, a little more dour and stuffy than usual. He and Auburn went straight to the laboratory and opened the safe. They found, among a few other controlled drugs, a solitary vial of morphine exactly like the one in the doctor's bag except that this one's seal was still intact. There were also a thick bundle of twenties in a hard plastic box that had once held cotton swabs and a sheaf of documents pertaining to the narcotics—blank order forms and invoices.

As soon as Kestrel had ascer-

tained that there were no usable latent prints, they began studying the narcotics records. It was evident at once that something was fishy. For as far back as the records went, Ewing had been purchasing morphine in lots of ten vials every few weeks, always from a different mail-order supplier.

"There's no way he could have used that much morphine in his practice," said Kestrel. "He's been selling it right out of this office, and there's his cash box."

"So where's the rest of the stock?"

"He probably unloaded the stuff as soon as he got it in. If I hadn't lifted the kid's prints off that syringe, I'd say one of his customers got greedy, zapped him with his own poison, and cleaned out his whole supply."

"Leaving behind one vial, with a street value of about five hundred dollars, not to mention a wad of bills?"

They counted the money together twice and were taking it to Mrs. Ewing when an outburst of shouting from the kitchen told them that Joey had finally reappeared. They stopped at the kitchen doorway, waiting for the tide of emotion to ebb.

"Where have you been all day?"

"Walking around." Joey, tall and thin as a rail, with his father's broad brow and his mother's flaxen hair and sulky mouth, stood in the darkened hall inside the back door as if reluctant to step into the light.

"Walking around where? Do



you know the police have been looking for you for hours?"

"I went downtown."

"You walked all the way downtown in that cotton jacket? What have you had to eat all day?"

"I had some fries at the Snack Shack."

"What'd you use for money?"

"I had money."

She turned and saw Auburn and Kestrel. "Joey, these men are from the police. They think your father was killed. And as if that weren't enough to worry about, I've been beside myself wondering what happened to you."

"Nothing happened to me. I just wanted to get out of the house."

"Look at your shoes!"

Bushkow came out of the breakfast nook. "Take it easy, Rose. He's back now, and he's obviously okay, give or take a couple of pounds of mud."

"Mrs. Ewing," said Auburn, advancing into the kitchen, "there was some money in the doctor's safe, and we want to turn it over to you. Unless you'd rather we locked it up again in the safe?"

"No, that's all right, I'll take it."

If she was surprised at the amount, it didn't show in her facial expression. When she left the room to put it away in her purse, Auburn saw his opportunity and grabbed it.

"Joey, I'm Sergeant Auburn. Could I talk to you privately for a couple of minutes? Maybe up in your room?"

Joey stared at him as if he

were something sticking to the underside of a rock, then acquiesced with a silent shrug and led the way upstairs. As he started up, Auburn signaled to Kestrel to call off the police search.

In his room Joey shed his jacket and sank into a chair like someone who'd been on his feet all day. Auburn sat on the edge of the bed so that they were both within the penumbra shed by the model hanging from the light. "I think you can see how your mom feels right now, Joey," he said. "I mean, about your being gone all day. She's pretty upset about your dad dying so suddenly, and she needs you close to her." Joey avoided his eye and nodded vigorously as if in hopes of getting the interview over as quickly as possible.

"How about you, Joey? How do you feel about your dad dying?"

"I don't know. Bad, I guess."

"Most kids your age think their folks are pretty nerdy. I imagine you and your dad had some differences."

"You could call them that."

"What would you call them?"

"Fights. Only he always won."

"Did he hit you?"

Joey nodded, and his features set in a mask. "He whipped me with his belt in a restaurant because I spilled my water. When I was six."

"That was a long time ago. Were there other times?"

"Lots of other times." His chin came forward. "He hit Mom, too."

"Did you ever want to hurt your dad?"



"Sure, I guess so."

"Ever do anything about it?"

Joey's eyes flashed to Auburn and away again. "He was bigger than I was."

Auburn took out the memorandum book. "Want to tell me about this?"

Joey stared hard at the bed as if he thought Auburn had just conjured the book out from under the mattress, but said nothing.

"You know where I found it, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Why did you take it?"

"My dad used to write stuff down in it about me, like whenever I got in trouble. I wanted to see what he wrote."

"So you took it out of his study—when?"

"This morning, after Mom fell asleep."

"Did you look at it?"

"Not yet."

"Did you take any of the papers out of it?"

"No."

"Why'd you take the keys?"

"I saw them there with the book and I—I thought I might go for a ride in the car."

"Did you take anything else from the office?"

"No."

"Or look at anything else down there?"

Joey remained silent.

"Any of his medical equipment?"

"I looked in his bag."

"Any particular reason?"

"I guess because I wasn't ever allowed to touch it when he was

alive. And I wanted to see the glass hypodermic. I was going to—smash it but—"

"Why did you want to smash it?"

"He used to give me a shot with it whenever I got sick, and he always used to—smile when he stuck the needle in."

Auburn went back downstairs with his shirt sticking to his skin and found Mrs. Ewing fixing Joey's supper. Kestrel and Dr. Bushkow had left.

"I'm going to be in the doctor's office for another few minutes," he told her. "I'll let you know when I leave."

He went back to Ewing's study and sat again at the dead man's desk.

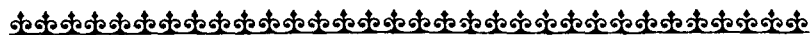
Occasional street noises, or rather alley noises, reached him from beyond the drawn curtains—a yapping dog, a dropped garbage can lid, a passing motorcycle. Nearer at hand he could hear only the hum of the fluorescent lights and the asthmatic chugging of the small refrigerator under the counter in the lab. The pervasive aroma of chemicals still hung in the air.

Auburn took out a thin stack of file cards on which he'd made notes during the course of the day and spread them before him on the desk blotter.

Dr. George Ewing had regularly purchased large quantities of morphine, but only two vials had been found in his office. He'd died of a massive overdose of morphine.

His doctor and the pathologist





who had performed the autopsy both said his stomach trouble was an ulcer, but on the day he died he inserted in his memorandum book a fresh laboratory report showing stomach cancer—a report from which someone had removed all identifying data.

Find the key to the coincidences and the contradictions, he told himself, and you'll know why he died.

He began a leisurely and methodical reexamination of the contents of the desk and the bookshelves. Then he put on the light in the lab and worked over the ground Kestrel had already covered that afternoon.

It was after nine o'clock when he went back through the darkened waiting room to the residential side of the building. Joey and his mother were huddled together on the living room couch, both of their faces wet with tears.

"I'm going to get out of your way for the time being," he told Mrs. Ewing, "but sometime tomorrow Officer Kestrel and I will be back to do some more checking in your husband's laboratory. We feel there's something there we're missing. We'll have a carpenter with us, and I'm going to warn you right now we may do a little damage. Anything we can't repair immediately—"

"I don't understand. What kind of damage?"

"Damage to the walls and possibly the cabinetry."

"But what are you looking for?"

"Evidence to explain Dr. Ewing's death."

"I still don't see what you mean. What kind of evidence?"

"Material evidence, ma'am. Concealed objects, fingerprints, traces of someone's presence or activities at the scene. Don't worry about it. We'll only be a couple of hours, and the department will pay for the repair of any damage to the building or its contents."

He left them both staring after him in bewilderment and drove four blocks to the nearest phone booth. There he made one call to headquarters and another to Candace Browne with an e.

At four twenty A.M. the light went on again in the study. No longer were the sounds of dogs, garbage can lids, or motorcycles to be heard—only the steady clatter of the refrigerator, and now furtive footsteps on the linoleum floor of the laboratory. A shadowy figure in a black turtleneck sweater, faded Levi's, and sneakers stood in the semidarkness facing the blank expanse of wall between the two tables laden with supplies.

The figure stooped and inserted a rubber-gloved finger beneath the bottom of the wainscoting where it overhung the baseboard, releasing a catch and opening a shallow cavity in the wall. A row of brown glass vials standing on a narrow ledge within the cavity gleamed in light reflected from the study.

As the floor creaked behind him and the light in the laboratory came on, the figure jerked



erect and spun around. "Just stand still, Dr. Bushkow," said Auburn, arching his back to ease the cramp caused by his long vigil in the bathroom next to the study. "Step away from the wall, and keep your hands in sight."

Bushkow stood cowering and blinking in the sudden light like a little boy caught raiding the cookie jar in the middle of the night. On seeing that Auburn was alone and unarmed, he regained a measure of composure. "You scared me half to death, sergeant. What did you think I was doing, stealing the spoons?"

"I know exactly what you were doing."

"Really? What's that?"

"Trying to obliterate any trace evidence you might have left behind when you planted a vial of concentrated morphine in Dr. Ewing's hidden storage compartment."

"And what makes you think I did that?"

"Come in here and sit down, doctor. You might as well take off the gloves. The vial with your prints on it is already at the crime lab."

Bushkow crumpled into a chair while Auburn sat down behind the desk. After formally cautioning his prisoner, he invited him to make a statement.

"Without witnesses?"

"Not exactly. Come on in, Fritz." A uniformed policeman emerged from the nearest treatment room and stood in the dark doorway, virtually filling it.

"Patrolman Dollinger came

along to make sure I didn't lose my objectivity."

"You seem to have all the answers already," said Bushkow. "What do you need a statement for?"

"I thought maybe you'd deny that you killed Ewing."

"What's the point?"

"Or try to justify doing it."

"I probably couldn't do that, either. Unless hating somebody nonstop for about twenty years is a valid defense these days."

"You told me Ewing made enemies wherever he went. But I understood you and he were friends."

"We were. But I still hated him because he married the only girl I've ever loved. I would probably have got over that by now if he hadn't treated her like an old shoe."

"How long had he been hooked on morphine?"

"I have no idea. Apparently he didn't mainline it, and he didn't shoot up every day. Art Valentine, who did the autopsy, found only a couple of healing skin punctures besides the fatal one."

Auburn nodded. "I've seen the preliminary report. But you must have known about his drug habit when you planted the vial of concentrated morphine."

"I found his hiding place in there by accident while I was helping out in the office when he was sick a few weeks ago. I couldn't figure out why everything was crammed onto those two little tables when there was such a big stretch of blank wall between them."



"I tackled that same puzzle about—" Auburn consulted his wristwatch "—eight hours ago. And found Ewing's secret supply, including the vial of concentrate you put in there, knowing sooner or later he'd unwittingly give himself a fatal overdose."

"How'd you know I'd come back for it?"

"I felt pretty sure you'd come back to tidy up when I put out the word that we were planning a more elaborate search that would probably lead to the discovery of the secret compartment."

"But how could you be sure I'd get the word?"

"I had a feeling that anything I told Mrs. Ewing would reach you pretty fast."

"Well, you were right about that." He glanced briefly at the sleepily vigilant Dollinger. "But don't get the idea she had anything to do with George's death. She still loved him. If she ever had any feeling for me, it was as a pal she could count on when her main man was out of commission."

Auburn leaned forward in his chair and put his elbows on the desk.

"Dr. Bushkow, I want to remind you that you're making a formal statement to two police officers and that every word you say becomes part of the body of evidence we're collecting to support a charge of first-degree murder against you. Do you admit that you replaced the morphine in one of the vials with a more

highly concentrated solution? So that eventually, by a process of elimination, Ewing would pick up that vial and use it to give himself his last fix?"

"I think I've already admitted that. Three minutes after I found the stash behind the paneling and realized George was an addict, I'd decided what I was going to do. I already had the morphine concentrate—had had it for years left over from some animal experiments I did when I was a resident. If you've got the vial with my prints on it, it wouldn't do me much good to try to explain it away. If I had that kind of imagination, I'd be a psychiatrist, not a pathologist."

"We've got the vial, all right—the only unsealed one that was in there. I don't know yet what's on it or in it because the night technician at the crime lab is on sick leave. The morphine concentrate was Dr. Valentine's suggestion. I ran into him when I took the vial in to the lab tonight, and he told me that the amount of morphine in Ewing's body was the equivalent of a whole vial of the standard strength of one and a half percent. But the volume of solution injected into his thigh was obviously much less than the contents of a whole vial."

Bushkow was scowling like a man who knows he's just been cheated out of a fortune at cards and hasn't got a prayer of proving it to anybody. Again his eyes flashed quickly to Dollinger and back again.

"If you didn't find my prints on



the vial, what made you think I'd come back for it?"

"I didn't know *you* would come back. I told Mrs. Ewing and Joey that we were going to take the lab apart tomorrow, figuring the word would get to you. I also called Brownie and told her."

"Brownie!" Bushkow smiled and shook his head. "That woman has worked in this dump for twenty-five years or so, but I'd bet my last dollar she never knew about the hidden compartment in the wall or Ewing's morphine habit."

"Maybe," conceded Auburn, "but I couldn't take that chance. I had to inform all the suspects I knew of. Once that was done, all I had to do was come back about midnight with Patrolman Dollinger, use Dr. Ewing's keys to get in, and sit in there shivering in the dark until somebody showed up."

"How did you know I had a key?"

"I didn't. I still don't. I figured if you had a strong enough motive to get in here, you'd find a way."

Bushkow suddenly looked dangerous, and Auburn was thankful for the solid desk between

them and for Fritz Dollinger's massive bulk framed in the doorway. He changed the subject.

"You referred to Dr. Ewing as an addict. Do you think he started taking morphine for his cancer pain?"

"What cancer pain?"

"The pain from his stomach cancer—"

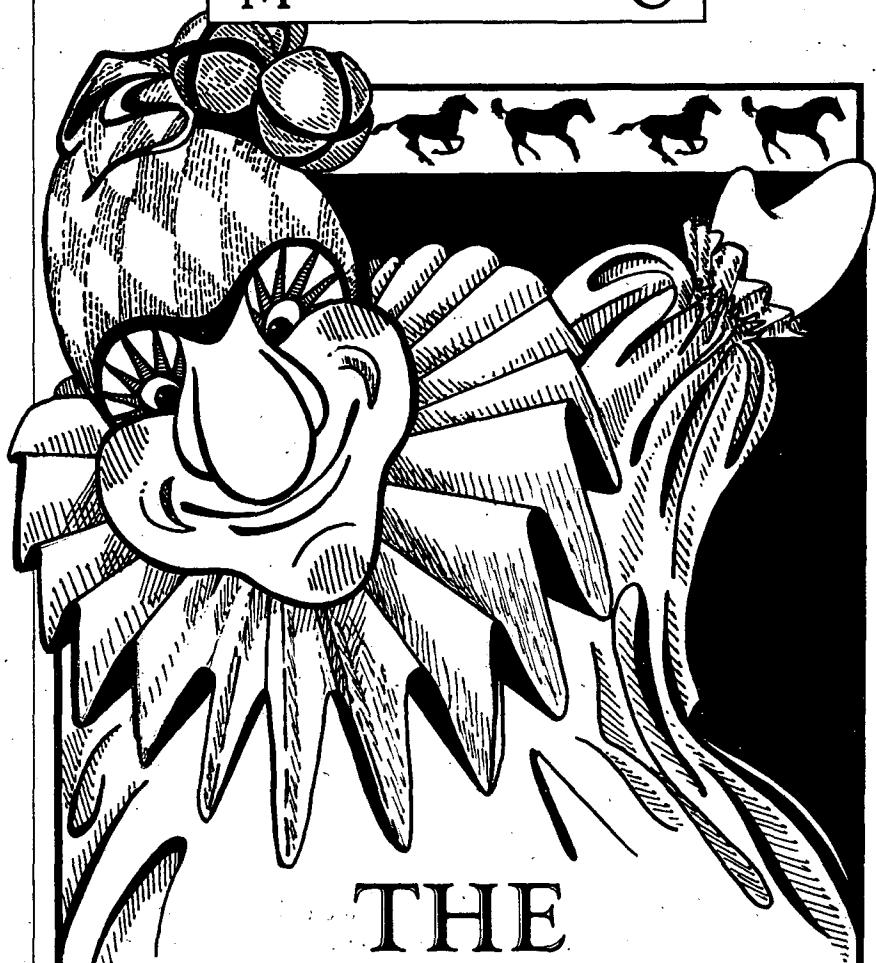
"That pathology report was phony," grumbled Bushkow impatiently. "It wasn't part of my plan for Rose to call me when George died. It never occurred to me that she would. But when she did call, I whipped up that report on the spur of the moment and planted it in George's book, figuring it might confuse matters enough to lead to a ruling of suicide."

"You're saying it wasn't a report on Dr. Ewing?"

"No, of course it wasn't. I told you, he had a benign ulcer."

"But he didn't. When I talked to Dr. Valentine tonight he'd just looked at the slides from the autopsy. Dr. Ewing did have cancer of the stomach. He wouldn't have lived another six months."

MYSTERY CLASSIC



THE  
TINKLE OF  
THE BELLS  
Anthony Wynne

*Illustration by Laurie Davis*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 9/98*

**D**r. Hailey glanced at the heavy type and then let the newspaper, which he had just bought, fall to the floor of the car. The shouting of the vendors of early editions containing this bombshell mingled in his ears with the deep roar of the traffic in Regent Street. He could see the eager men and women clutching at the sheets and devouring the unwelcome news.

Then he closed his eyes and beheld again the lovely dark face of the girl who had been his partner at dinner the night before and who had confided to him that The Wizard was bound to win the Derby because she had dreamed that she saw him passing the post a length ahead of the rest of the field. Zazel Belamy had added that the fact that she had Romany blood in her veins made her dreams well nigh infallible.

So much for Romany blood!

His mind drifted to the owner of the racehorse whose victory, until this minute forty-eight hours before the great race, had been regarded by the whole country as assured. Lord Steadhouse was too good a sportsman to resent any blow which fortune might deal him, but if this blow was really serious, it would test his courage to the very utmost. The Wizard was more than a likely colt; he was a supremely great horse whose name already had achieved imperishable glory.

The car drew up in the throng at Oxford Circus. The buyers and the sellers of news were so busy here that they risked their lives every moment, rushing in and out of the maze of traffic. Consternation was on every face, as though some national calamity was immediately toward. It was like scratching of the Tetrarch over again, with added emphasis. Even the policemen on point duty waved their directions with less than their usual aplomb. He caught, through the open window, the remark of a bus driver to one of his colleagues:

"'Oo says Centaur now for a win? Eh, Bill?"

Next moment his car was gliding up towards Portland Place. It swung through Queen Ann Street and came to his door. He picked up the newspaper to give to Jenkins, his butler, whose distress he scarcely dared to contemplate. Jenkins' love of racehorses was as profound as was his own ignorance of everything about them.

"A telegram for you, sir."

He took the yellow envelope and opened it. Then, as he glanced at its contents, an exclamation of astonishment escaped him. It was from the owner of The Wizard, Lord Steadhouse, and ran:

*"Can you come immediately The Yewtrees? Deeply anxious and bewildered."*

He handed the telegram and the newspaper together to his servant



and stood awaiting the shock of surprise which he knew must follow. When it had subsided a little he asked, "Well, what do you make of it?"

Jenkins, who remained permanently under the influence of his Nat Gould, drew a sharp breath. "The 'orse 'as been done in," he declared in a hoarse whisper. "Not a doubt, sir. And it's as a detective and not as a doctor that 'is lordship is asking your 'elp."

That view expressed the situation with great exactitude as Dr. Hailey encountered it some hours later at the old house on the edge of Newmarket Heath. Lord Steadhouse met him in such a state of agitation as he had not believed possible in a man naturally so self-possessed. He conducted him at once to his smoking room, the door of which he closed with great care behind them. Then he declared, "My dear Hailey, there has been foul play here. The very worst of foul play. It is a miracle that the horse has not been scuppered."

The seaman's term, a heritage of his naval service, came from his lips with intense bitterness. Then, suddenly, his expression of anger changed to a look of bewilderment. He added in low tones, "But in a manner so mysterious that I can make neither head nor tail of it, which must be my excuse for trespassing on the genius of an old friend."

Dr. Hailey had seated himself and found his snuffbox. He took a pinch before he asked for such details of the supposed outrage as were available. The eagerness in his voice made short work of the idea that he had sacrificed himself in any way in coming to The Yew-trees. This eminent specialist in diseases of the human mind was possessed by a passion for the study of mental deformity as exemplified in crime which nothing could quench.

"We made the discovery this morning," Lord Steadhouse declared. "The Wizard was found shivering with fear in a corner of his box, his nerve apparently quite gone. I sent for the vet at once, and he declares that there can be no doubt the colt has suffered some terrible fright. We decided there and then to postpone his going to Epsom till tomorrow. But even if he runs, I don't believe now that he has a chance."

He paused and the look of perplexity in his eye deepened. "It is scarcely credible, in the circumstances, but nevertheless it seems to be absolutely certain that nobody entered his box during the night. There is not a sign, not so much as a suggestion, of any tampering with locks or bolts."

"Does that apply also to the windows?"

"Absolutely. In fact, the largest window has been nailed down. The others are too small in any case to enter by, but they were all closed except the skylight, and they have not been disturbed in any way. There is a spider's web intact between the skylight and its frame."

Dr. Hailey took another pinch of snuff. "I don't pretend to know very much about horses," he said, "but I have heard that they are subject to brain storms, just as certain highly strung men and women are. It is not possible, is it, that The Wizard was afflicted in that way?"

Lord Steadhouse shook his head. "Oh no. Quite impossible," he said. "The colt must have shown some signs of nervousness before this if he possessed that trait in his character. As a matter of fact he has never on any occasion—and remember that I bred him myself—given us the least anxiety. His sire Permutation, as perhaps you know, had the reputation in his racing days of being the best-tempered horse in training; his dam Mayfly I can vouch for myself."

He took a sharp turn across the room and back again.

"Something," he declared in tones of deep conviction, "happened last night. But what it was or how it happened is the most complete mystery of which I have ever had any knowledge."

"One question more and I will ask you to take me to the stables." Dr. Hailey had risen and was standing an immense figure with his back to the empty fireplace. "Did anybody hear anything during the night? I mean any of the stableboys or employees?"

"Not that I know of. One of the lads told me that the owls were hooting very loudly. But that happens here too often to frighten a soul."

They walked through the shrubbery to the group of buildings in which Lord Steadhouse's racehorses were accommodated. A man whom his host introduced as his trainer, Wills, was standing in front of one of the loose boxes. "I fancy he's a bit quieter now," he told Lord Steadhouse. "I have been listening and haven't heard anything at all."

"There is no further light of any kind?"

"No, nothing."

The man indicated the windows and showed the doctor that the dust on their sills and fastenings had not been disturbed. They were protected below by a wooden lattice which must have effectually prevented any attempt to enter the box through them. He turned to the door and called attention to the heavy locks, none of which had so much as been tampered with. Then he opened the upper section very quietly. The Wizard was standing well away from the door. He turned his beautiful head sharply and immediately seemed to shrink, as from sudden danger. They saw a tremor of fear sweep over him. The light was reflected in wonderful undulations from the uncovered portions of his lithe black body. Dr. Hailey felt a sense of quiet and poignant regret. It would indeed be calamitous if so perfect an instrument should be turned from its purpose. He glanced at the pale, weary face of the trainer beside him. Wills looked like a man who has seen the utter ruin of his life work.

He was a quiet fellow, of the lean and loose-jointed type, whose reputation had not apparently affected in the smallest degree the natural simplicity of his character. It was quite obvious that he sorrowed for the horse more than he sorrowed for the race. He spoke to it in gentle, reassuring tones until the tense fear of its pose had relaxed a little. Then he opened the lower portion of the door and entered the box. Lord Steadhouse signed to Dr. Hailey to follow. He was in process of indicating the condition of the locks and windows when his trainer uttered an exclamation of amazement and horror.

"Good heavens, look at this!"

They came to where the horse was standing. Wills had lifted the blanket from The Wizard's flank and was pointing with his free hand to a tiny area on the glossy black coat from which the hair seemed to have been pulled away. The skin at this place was reddened and the surrounding hairs glued together, evidently with blood. Lord Steadhouse gasped. "A wound?"

"It must be. I don't think the horse could inflict such an injury on itself."

Wills rolled the blanket farther back and then added, "I examined his legs carefully this morning, but it didn't occur to me to look under the blanket, seeing that there was no sign of a tear or even a scrape."

He stood back to allow Dr. Hailey to approach nearer. The doctor raised his eyeglass and focused it on the injured skin. Then he passed his hand down the animal's flank.

"The scrape is a superficial one, I think," he said. "The curious thing about it is that it seems to have been inflicted from above downward—and yet one would have imagined that the blanket, in that case, must be torn also."

"It is not torn. It is not even cut. That was why we had no suspicion."

Wills' tones were strained and difficult. He added, "Apparently the scoundrels lifted it before inflicting this wound."

Dr. Hailey moved to the other side of the horse and examined the opposite flank. Then he ran his hand along the animal's ribs and over his forequarters to his neck. As he came to this, The Wizard started slightly as though he had been hurt. He focused his eyeglass again and saw another, similar scrape on the shining skin. It was almost completely covered by the animal's mane. He called his companions' attention to it, and then, leaving them to complete the investigations, made a fresh survey of the doors and windows of the box.

That yielded no further information. He returned to the stableyard where a boy stood regarding the loose-box with melancholy eyes. He beckoned the lad and asked him to conduct him right around the group of buildings.

A wide paddock stretched behind The Wizard's stable. It was empty, and the new grass seemed to be entirely unruffled. The doctor searched it in vain for any sign which might afford a clue to the mystery. He told the stable lad to go across the field and examine the fence on the opposite side for indications of attempts to scale it. He himself walked to a clump of trees situated about a hundred yards from the back of the loose-box.

Nothing rewarded this joint effort, and he returned to the stable. He found owner and trainer still busy with their examination of the colt's skin. They had located a third injury and further had discovered a number of tender places on the animal's neck, small swellings as though blows had recently been inflicted.

Dr. Hailey examined these latter with much greater care than he had bestowed on the scrapes. At his request, the hair covering one of them was gently clipped away by the trainer. There was disclosed a row of tiny abrasions, one at least of which had penetrated the surface layers of the skin. Wills glanced up suddenly at the roof and then cried out in horror, "Good God! That must be the explanation. It would be quite easy to throw stones down through the skylight."

"It would not, however, be easy to climb onto the roof," Dr. Hailey turned as he spoke and fixed his rather vacant eyes on the trainer's face. "I have just been looking to see if a ladder has been used recently. There is no sign of it."

He completed his examination and let his eyeglass fall. "There is no opening anywhere, is there," he asked, "large enough to admit the barrel of an air pistol?"

"None."

"In that case we had better reexamine the roof. And then perhaps the boy can be told off to search the tan on the floor here for stones or anything else he can find."

A ladder was brought, and Dr. Hailey mounted it. The spider's web of which Lord Steadhouse had spoken remained in position between the frame of the skylight and the window, though it had been broken slightly at one side. He obtained a clear view of the horse below. He called to Wills to raise the window, by means of the cords which ran down into the loose-box, and when this was done, he threw a coin against one of the walls below. The colt scarcely seemed to notice this action. Nor did it show any sign of anxiety when the action was repeated.

"Now shut the window, will you?"

As the glass sank into position, he tapped sharply on it. And still The Wizard remained unmoved. He descended to the ground, where Lord Steadhouse was awaiting him with the utmost eagerness.

"Well?"

"You saw for yourself. Throwing things from the skylight has no effect on the horse. Had that been the initial cause of his terror, there must have been an immediate reaction."

Lord Steadhouse glanced admiringly at his friend. He had not understood the meaning of the tests which he had just witnessed. He nodded his agreement.

"Yes, undoubtedly," he said. "Anything that has frightened a horse once always frightens it a second time, and a third and a fourth, always." He sighed deeply, adding, "so that we are no nearer the solution of the mystery than we were before."

They returned to the house to dinner. Dr. Hailey confessed himself entirely at a loss. He went to bed early because there remained the faint hope that what his reason denied him, his sleeping brain might afford; some clue perhaps, seen without being consciously observed. He passed in review in his mind all the circumstances of the case, and he was engaged in the process of brain stimulation when he fell asleep.

The process resumed itself automatically when, three hours later, he sat up in bed listening. Footsteps, very light footsteps but clearly defined and unmistakable nevertheless, were passing on the flagstones under his bedroom window.

He rose and went swiftly to the open casement. He glanced out across the old-world garden towards the block of the stables which showed up as a dark stain on the lightness of the moon-flooded earth. The garden was empty. He could trace the path leading from the house to the stables in almost its whole length, and even the path which joined it just under his window and which formed a shortcut to the main road.

He stood gazing out with troubled eyes. There could be no doubt about the footsteps; yet it seemed improbable that their author could have made so swift an escape from the garden. The steps had been rather slow, almost halting. Suddenly he caught his breath.

From behind one of the bushes which flanked the path a figure had appeared—a woman. She seemed to be young, but he could not assure himself on that point. She stood a moment irresolute, then she moved slowly in the direction of the stables with downcast eyes.

Dr. Hailey uttered an exclamation. He retired into the room and hastily pulled on some of his clothes. He crept out into the silence of the old house and descended the stairs to the front door. With an infinitude of precaution he pulled back the bolts and turned the key in the lock.

The moonlight as he pushed the door open caused him to draw back for a moment, so bright and pitiless was it. He glanced out cautiously to assure himself that there was no hidden watcher on this

side of the house. Then he crept cautiously along the edge of the flowerbed which lay between the path and the wall of the building. This brought him to a point not far from his bedroom window. He waited, with his eyes fixed on the distant part of the garden.

It was obvious that the intruder had left this area, because no sound of any sort broke the wide stillness of the night. He moved down the path leading to the stables and came to the bush behind which the woman had sheltered. He hesitated whether or not to examine the ground with his lamp but decided finally against that course. The pathway at the far end of the garden was barred by a gate, but this, as he had observed on the previous evening, was not kept locked. He passed through it and emerged on the open paddock.

A moment later he had jumped back again among the shadows of the undergrowth. The figure he was following was crossing the field on his left with the same deliberation which had characterized her movements in the garden. She came to a group of trees. At the same moment the hooting of an owl thrilled in the silence.

He waited, determined to challenge her when she should return. The boldness of the enterprise, carried out at a moment when suspicion was likely to be aroused to its highest point, amazed him. Was it possible that visit bore no relationship to the injury inflicted on the race-horse? Or again, could it be that those who had inflicted the injury believed that no suspicion of its real character would be entertained?

"Good heavens!"

He sprang forward; the woman he was watching had vaulted the fence which enclosed the paddock and disappeared out of sight.

A moment later he saw her again in the next field, apparently striking back towards the high road. That meant that she would pass the stables on her right and not return to the garden at all.

He turned back and ran towards the house. He reached the main avenue and rushed down it to the turnpike. Again he heard the shrill hooting of the owl, which resented, apparently, this midnight intrusion on its solitude.

The high road was utterly deserted. He strode along it, keeping as far as possible under the shadow of the hedge. At the first bend from which a long stretch could be commanded, he stood for a moment, listening again. And then suddenly he threw himself down in the ditch.

A twig had snapped a few feet away from him.

A moment later he heard someone jump down into the road. He waited an instant and then leaped to his feet. As he did so, a figure darted past him, a young, lithe figure with a shawl bound about the shoulders gypsy fashion, swift with the startled energy of a wild animal. The girl had obtained an advantage of more than fifty yards before he sprang in pursuit.



She maintained that lead in spite of his longer stride. After a few seconds she increased it. They came to a sharp corner, and she disappeared from view. He redoubled his effort and swung round the corner after her. Next moment he uttered a cry of amazement. The girl had turned, at bay. She had thrown the shawl she was wearing about her face. With incredible, almost tigerish ferocity she rushed at him, bent low suddenly to avoid his grasp, and seized him by the knees. He tried to slacken pace, but his weight resisted that effort. He felt the ground slip from under his feet. Then he went crashing down head first on the surface of the road, clutching at his assailant as he fell.

For a moment his mind was darkened. When it cleared again, he saw that he was quite alone. In his hand was a piece of torn cloth. He picked himself up painfully and stood gazing with bewildered eyes on the empty landscape. Further pursuit, as he realized, was useless. He turned back towards The Yewtrees.

His head was cut slightly. He bathed it when he reached his bedroom. Then he undressed again and lay down. But now sleep refused to come to him. In its stead an intense activity of the mind compelled his thoughts towards the solution of the mystery which had been so violently thrust on them.

One thing was certain. This girl had been desperately afraid lest he should see her face. She had been ready, too, to go to any length rather than be captured. Her courage and her agility were above the qualities usually displayed by the class to which, apparently, she belonged. That idea dwelt in his mind, yet it offered no clue on which he might hope to work.

He got up as soon as the day dawned and went out again to reinvestigate the scene of his discomfiture. He examined the ground carefully in the vain hope that some accident might have favored him with a fresh piece of evidence. But there was nothing to be seen. He climbed the hedge and struck across the fields, taking the line which, as he guessed, the girl had taken when returning from her search in the paddock. He reached the clump of trees from which the hoot of the owl had come without having obtained the least enlightenment. He bent down to examine the ground.

A moment later he stood up again sharply and listened. A faint tinkling of bells was borne to him across the stillness of the morning.

He glanced about him with perplexed eyes. The sound seemed strangely incongruous, nor could he determine from what quarter it proceeded. It came, moreover, intermittently, as though some invisible hand shook the bells and then again desisted.

He waited a moment or two and then walked a few yards in the direction of the house. The sun had risen, and its earliest rays quivered

in the air. The whole sky was filled with new light. He stood rejoicing in the wonderful spectacle.

The tinkling of the bells came once more to his ears.

He turned sharply and as he did so uttered a cry of amazement. A few yards away on a branch of one of the trees was seated a very small monkey clad in a coat of green velvet on which a great number of tiny metal bells had been embroidered. The bells gleamed in the sunlight.

He approached the little creature, which seemed inclined to be friendly. But just as he came below the bough on which it sat, it grimaced angrily and sprang away and with almost incredible agility hoisted itself from branch to branch until he lost sight of it among the leaves. Then it reappeared again, swinging giddily far above him, its bells filling the morning with their diminutive notes.

He drew a sharp breath, and the dullness of his eyes was transformed momentarily to excitement. So this—*this*—was the explanation they had been seeking! This wretched creature, escaped no doubt from some gypsy van, had actually placed in jeopardy The Wizard's chance of winning his greatest race!

He stood with the wonder of the thing stamped on his kindly features. The monkey must have entered the horsebox while the colt was out to exercise. Doubtless it fell asleep there among the warm hay and so passed unnoticed. He recalled the tiny marks on the horse's neck, the appearance and character of which had so greatly puzzled him: bites! The scrape, too, on the animal's flank under its blanket made, no doubt, when the monkey tried to jump from the ground to the plunging racehorse's back and missed its footing in the darkness. No wonder The Wizard, shut in with this little fury, had become terrorstricken. Again he started. And that, of course, furnished the complete explanation of the gypsy girl's midnight search. She was trying to find her lost pet. Possibly the owl calls he had heard had been her summons to it; gypsies were reputed to keep monkeys trained to steal eggs at night, and no doubt it was necessary to have some innocent-sounding way of recalling the marauders.

He thought with a sigh of regret of the terror his sudden appearance must have occasioned the poor girl. She must have supposed that her very life was threatened when she defended herself thus vigorously. He returned to the house and went at once to Lord Steadhouse's bedroom to offer his explanation of the mystery.

Next morning Dr. Hailey received an early summons to visit Mr. Jack Belamy in Belgrave Square. His sister, who spoke on the phone, declared that her brother had suffered from a severe fainting attack while getting ready to go to the Derby.

"We want you to tell him that he mustn't go," she added. "He flatly refuses to listen to anybody here."

As he drove down from Harley Street, the doctor recalled the details of the case. Belamy was reputed to be a very rich man; he was tremendously eccentric and said to be a heavy plunger on the turf. As so often happened in such cases, symptoms of mental strain had begun to show themselves, and during the last few weeks these had taken an exaggerated form. No doubt the excitement of Derby Day had proved more than his agitated nerves could stand.

The car stopped. He entered the big house and found himself a moment later face to face with Zazel Belamy. Her beautiful dark face was drawn with anxiety. "My dear doctor," she cried, "it is so good of you to have come so quickly." She advanced toward him and spoke in low tones, telling him how her brother had fainted on getting out of bed. "We got a terrible fright at the moment. But happily he seems to have recovered now."

The door of the room opened as she spoke, and the patient strode in. He protested in ringing tones against the absurdity of summoning a doctor. Nevertheless, his lips were rather blue, and he seemed a trifle unsteady on his feet. Dr. Hailey ordered him to go back to bed at once. Just then a child came to the door of the room and announced that the car was waiting.

"Please stay outside, Sybil," Zazel Belamy said in sharp tones.

The child frowned, and then, in a manner which proclaimed how spoiled it was, shook a punchinello toy it carried in its hand, so that the bells on the puppet's hat jingled harshly. "I want to go now," it cried.

The girl turned to the doctor. "My niece is crazy about going to the Derby," she explained, "and I should hate to disappoint her. We are rather late as it is—" She hesitated a moment. "So long as you can assure me there is no danger."

"Oh no—no danger!"

Zazel Belamy hurried from the room. A moment later they heard a car start from the door. Dr. Hailey turned to his patient. "It's the race, I suppose," he said dryly.

"My God, yes, doctor. I tell you I couldn't help it, I've taken tremendous risks." Belamy's big black eyes rolled as he spoke.

"The risk of your life included. As I told you when I last saw you, your blood pressure is dangerously high. If you do not give up your gambling habits, nothing, I think, can save you." The doctor's voice was stern. But he observed that his patient scarcely listened to him.

"It's that Wizard colt," he declared. "Never have believed in the horse."

Dr. Hailey cut short a confession which he could see was powerfully exciting his patient. He repeated his order that Belamy should go to bed and announced his intention of waiting in the house till he was

obeyed. The man rang the bell for his servant and went upstairs. A few minutes later the doctor joined him.

He left the bedroom very shortly and descended to the hall. It was empty. He crossed to a table on which he had deposited his hat and gloves and was about to take these when suddenly his body seemed to stiffen. Lying folded on the table was a woman's shawl. With a quick, almost furtive movement, he put his hand in his pocket and extracted a small fragment of cloth. The fragment he had torn from the shawl of the gypsy girl on the road at Newmarket. He fitted the fragment to a tear in the garment before him.

It fitted exactly. A look of deepening concern appeared on his face. He caught his breath. Then, suddenly seizing his hat, he rushed from the house. Getting in his big Daimler car, he told the astonished driver to take him to Epsom, to the racecourse, adding, "It is now nearly midday. There is not a moment to lose."

The drive seemed an interminable one. After Sutton was passed, it became almost more than he could endure because of the traffic delays and stoppages. But at last, at two thirty, the car mounted the final ridge. The immense, wonderful Derby crowd, disposed in the great hollow of the Downs, was spread before him. He sprang out of the vehicle and strode down through the phalanx of motor omnibuses and charabancs to the course.

He reached it at a point on the straight very close to Tattanham Corner. The crowd was not dense here. He stood gazing over the heads of the people in front of him at the people opposite. Then he walked to the corner and crossed the short course which tails off at this point. He mounted the hill, stopping every few minutes to repeat his scrutiny.

His face was flushed and his eyes bright. But the look of tense anxiety which had filled them since he left London remained. He kept glancing nervously at his watch and then at the distant height where, as he could see, the horses were gathering for the great race.

He managed to elbow his way to the railings at the top of the hill. At the same moment, like the earliest whisper of a storm, a muttered exclamation came from the vast crowd.

"They're off!"

He caught his breath. He leaned forward searching—searching with his horrified eyes, despair and wild hope mingled in his expression.

"My God!"

The sound of galloping hooves came to his ears. He hesitated just an instant. Then, in spite of the yell of consternation which greeted his terrible foolhardiness, sprang out on the racecourse and rushed across it.

As he came to the railings, the galloping hooves thundered near at hand. The tense silence of a mighty expectancy was in the air. He scrambled over and then, with a movement so swift that it was complete before the amazed spectators had time to prevent or protest against it, he snatched its toy from the hands of a child standing close to the railings and flung it far back across the heads of the crowd. The toy, as it was hurled away, emitted a faint tinkling of small bells.

At the same moment a gasp of horror held the mighty crowd in sudden and dreadful suspense.

The Wizard, who was galloping close to the rails, swerved away suddenly as though some nameless terror had struck at his heart. For a moment it seemed as though catastrophe, huge and overwhelming, was inevitable.

The next instant the colt had steadied himself. He swept out of sight into the straight, and the roar of the multitude about the stands proclaimed already his march to victory.

Dr. Hailey had made his way back through the ranks of the crowd. As he reached the outside of it, the news that The Wizard had won was passed along. He searched the grass with his eyes a moment and then, finding what he sought, bent down and picked up the punchinello toy which he had flung away. He strode with it after the retreating figure of a young girl who was leading a child by the hand. He drew level with the girl and raised his hat.

"Your niece's toy, I think, Miss Belamy," he remarked.

Zazel Belamy's face was as pale as ashes. The words he had meant to speak, words which would have emphasized his execration of the diabolical cleverness she had shown, faded on his lips. He said merely, "It would seem that even the lightest tinkle of a bell sets The Wizard shying. No doubt an association which recalls some former terrible experience to the horse's memory."

Again he raised his hat. He fell back among the crowd which flowed round about them.

Next morning the news of Jack Belamy's death was in all the papers. One of those vouchsafed to its readers the additional information that the dead man's losses, occasioned by the victory of The Wizard at Epsom, were believed to be not less than fifty thousand pounds.

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# BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



**D**orothy Cannell's redoubtable and irresistible British heroine Ellie debuted in the hilarious *The Thin Woman*. She's no less spunky and delightful in her ninth outing, **The Spring Cleaning Murders** (Viking, \$21.95), though she's now a happily married wife of a restaurateur and mother of two sprightly twins. She's also her mother's daughter, and she can't ignore the fact that the crocuses are blooming. That means that Merlin's Court, the huge old house she inherited, is due for its annual sprucing. Alas, her trusty char, Mrs. Malloy, is heading out of town—but perhaps that's just as well because it appears that the eccentric members of the tight-knit group dubbed The Chitterton Fells Charwomen's Association are being ruthlessly rubbed out. Needless to say, our Ellie prefers sleuthing over scrubbing any day, and soon she's off and running in this latest homicidal dust-up. (Blame Dorothy Cannell for any puns in this review. She brings it out in me.)

Sister Rose Callahan of the North Homage Shaker Village makes her second appearance in Deborah Woodworth's **A Deadly Shaker Spring** (Avon, \$5.99). The year is 1937, and many of the Shakers' neighbors in the surrounding Kentucky county are faring badly. The Shakers, however, through their industry and willingness to employ labor-saving devices, are managing to hold their own, to market their crops and distribute their herbs out of state. But the community is being harassed by incidents that bear a striking resemblance to events that took place decades earlier, during the period when the young Rose left her Shaker upbringing and ventured out into the wide world; the key may be held by Rose's elderly mentor, who lies stricken and speechless from a recent stroke. Readers who fancy a fresh historical setting and a strong female protagonist will be glad they picked this one up.

Private eye fans who haven't yet discovered Earl Emerson's Seat-

tle detective Thomas Black have the perfect opportunity to do so with his latest case, **Catfish Cafe** (Ballantine, \$22). When Thomas was younger, he was a member of the police force and partnered with a man named Luther Little. There's history between the two, and Thomas is pleased to have an opportunity to repay the older black man when Luther explains that he's worried about his grown granddaughter. Her car was found crashed at the bottom of an incline, and inside was Balinda's purse—as well as the body of a young white man dead of three gunshot wounds. Emerson has created a large cast of memorable characters in Little's extended family, and Black becomes immersed in their histories as he searches for a murderer. Look for strong writing, a likeable hero, and some great characters in this one, and you won't be disappointed.

Leonard Foglia and David Richards have updated the gothic in **1 Ragged Ridge Road** (Pocket, \$6.50) to tell a tale that should appeal to readers of Mary Higgins Clark. Carol Roblins is a military wife and mother of a young son trapped in his own head; both conditions have distanced her from her husband. When their realtor shows her the wreck of a mansion for sale, Carol sees only the potential in the place, the shadow of its former glory. Once her husband accepts a European assignment, Carol is determined to research the old house's history and turn the place into a charming bed-and-breakfast operation. She soon discovers, however, that a shocking, still unsolved murder and an inexplicable suicide occurred on Christmas Eve 1928 at 1 Ragged Ridge Road. Worse, she is soon to discover that there may yet be someone alive who doesn't want the old house to give up its secrets.

Peter King's third adventure for his British hero, *The Gourmet Detective*, is **Dying on the Vine** (St. Martin's, \$22.95), a cosy whodunit with fresh bouquet and satisfying body. His latest client is a huge British conglomerate with vineyards in Provence surrounding a tiny vineyard owned by the mysterious Peregrine Group. The smaller vineyard has been pestering the large company to sell, and a detective sent down to investigate has disappeared. Now they wish to pay *The Gourmet Detective* a fabulous sum to stay in Provence at a first-class hotel, sample the area's cuisine and wines, and try to figure out just what the heck the Peregrine folks want with more land. Tough assignment, thinks our hero, until corpses begin to litter the beautiful scenery. Learn something about wine-making and vicariously gorge yourself on the incredible food as you shadow *The Gourmet Detective* in his latest case.

Michelle Spring's **Standing in the Shadows** (Ballantine, \$23) gives readers a female private eye comparable to V. I. Warshawski and a twisty psychological plot worthy of Elizabeth George. British P.I. Laura Principal is approached by the elder brother of a preteen

who was convicted of murdering his middle-aged foster mother two years earlier at her home outside Cambridge. Her client isn't asking Laura to find proof of the lad's innocence; even he has come to accept his kid brother's confession. Instead, he wants Laura to discover the motive. Why would a child bash in the head of an apparently nice widow who had taken him into her home? The answer ultimately lies in the heart of a dangerous sociopath who has probably never known the real definition of "love." Spring's first novel, *Every Breath You Take*, was nominated for two mystery genre awards. Her latest will probably garner several more.

Harlan Coben has already won an Edgar, a Shamus, and an Anthony Award for his earlier novels starring sports agent Myron Bolitar, and **One False Move** (Delacorte, \$21.95) deserves similar attention. Like Robert B. Parker and Robert Crais, Coben has a winner in his lead detective. Bolitar was a professional athlete before his injury; he now represents other athletes. But his latest client is the wily CEO of a huge sports manufacturing conglomerate; his assignment is to act as bodyguard to a young black star of the fledgling women's basketball league. Brenda Slaughter is talented, smart, and strikingly beautiful, and the fans love her. Soon Myron does, too. That doesn't make his job any easier as he wrangles with a deadly secret in the girl's past, and more than one killer who is determined to let sleeping dogs lie.

Anne Perry's latest Victorian mystery is a Thomas and Charlotte Pitt case set in the wealthy London area known as **Brunswick Gardens** (Fawcett Columbine, \$25). A handsome young female scholar has fallen to her death down the main staircase of her employer's house. No one saw her fall, but several people did hear her exclaim moments earlier—a cry implying that the man of the house pushed her. Indeed, there seems no good reason for her to have fallen, and when the autopsy shows she was three months pregnant, suspicion thickens. Pitt, however, has trouble seeing the man, a dry and intellectual theological scholar and Episcopal minister, as a lover, much less as a murderer. That leaves his son (a boy about to cause his own scandal by converting to Roman Catholicism) and the reverend's curate, Pitt's former brother-in-law. As always, an intriguing plot, well-drawn characters, and strong period atmosphere: a lot of bang for your buck.

# THE STORY THAT WON

The March Mysterious Photo-Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia. John L. Reilly of Clearwater, Franklin, Wisconsin; James gon; Kathryn Deloria of Lever-of Poquoson, Virginia; David da; Sharon Cook of Beverly Amanda Davidson of Roselle



graph contest was won by Art Honorable mentions go to Florida; Dianne C. Perrone of Wilson of Saint Helens, Oreging, Michigan; William Glose Magnusson of Hialeah, Florida; Farms, Massachusetts; and Park, New Jersey.

Photo by Rolan Fajardo

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## LET ME COUNT THE WAYS by Art Cosing

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"I tell you, Harry, it's eerie," Bill said. "All my life I've been haunted by the number two."

"How so?" Harry asked.

"Just look at the record," Bill said. "I started my life as a twin. My parents divorced when I was two. I repeated the second grade twice. I got booted out of college in my sophomore year. I married at twenty-two, after a two week courtship. I didn't suspect she was a two-timer."

Harry said, "You divorced two years later, right?"

"How did you know?"

"Just a guess," Harry said.

"I started my own business in '82. I manufactured and sold men's pants."

"Pairs of pants, of course," Harry said.

"Of course," Bill said. "My business profits doubled in the first two years. My fortune doubled again every year thereafter. I purchased the Twin Towers on Swan Lake for two million dollars. I used a pair of swans for the company logo."

"I'm beginning to see the pattern," Harry said.

"I've saved the latest two's for last," Bill said. "This year the Internal Revenue Service discovered I was keeping two sets of books. Their lawyers say I owe the government twenty-two million dollars in unpaid back taxes. To paraphrase the old proverb, Harry, my life has been just two damned things after another."

Harry shook his head. "Too bad," he said.

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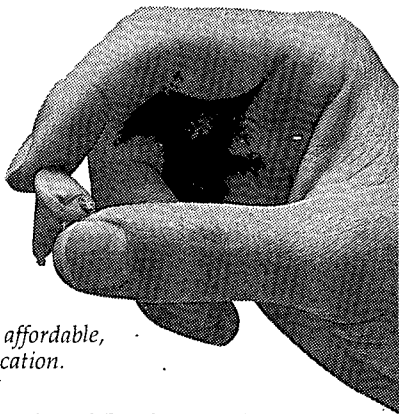
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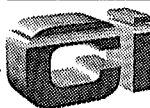
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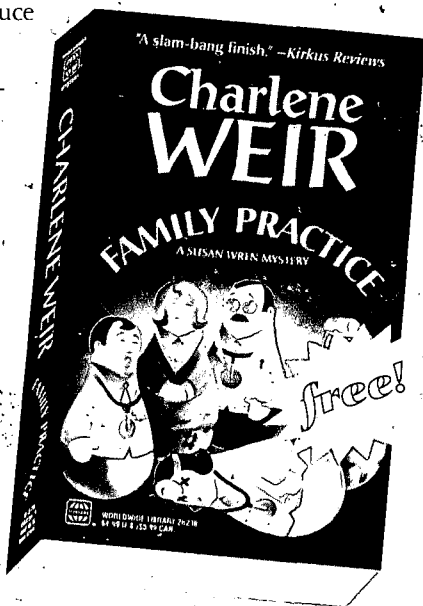
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